

# WYOMING

## FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2026



# BACK TO BASICS

**Cowboys have new offensive approach  
going into Sawvel's third season**



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## On The Cover:

University of Wyoming football is looking to turn the corner by implementing a new offensive attack. That starts with the addition of quarterback Tyler Hughes, left, and offensive coordinator Christian Taylor.

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

## CREDITS:

### WYOSPORTS STAFF:

ALEX TAYLOR  
Assistant Editor

LEO BEACH  
Photographer

### SECTION DESIGNER:

Darla Allen

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LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS  
Quarterback Tyler Hughes, right, and  
offensive coordinator Christian Taylor  
reunited in Laramie after spending  
time together at William & Mary.

# HUGHES, TAYLOR

## reunite for final run in Laramie

By ALEX TAYLOR  
WyoSports

Christian Taylor knew he had something special when he recruited Tyler Hughes.

Hughes, a 6-foot quarterback, was a two-time all-state selection out of Marietta, Georgia. He threw for more than 7,000 yards and 70 touchdowns in his final two high school seasons.

Taylor convinced him to sign

with FCS William & Mary out of high school. Taylor was Hughes' offensive coordinator for two seasons with the Tribe before he joined the Buffalo Bills staff in 2024.

Hughes stayed at William & Mary, rose up the depth chart and took over the starting job. He threw for 2,330 yards and 20 touchdowns with three interceptions in 2025. Hughes added 670 yards and 11 scores on the ground.

The quarterback entered the transfer portal and signed with Wyoming this offseason. His commitment came just days after the Cowboys announced Taylor as their new offensive coordinator.

"It's just crazy how life works sometimes," Taylor said. "If you had told me a few years ago that Tyler and I would hook back up in Laramie, Wyoming, I would have

said you're nuts. I got to recruit Tyler to William & Mary, and I was with him his first couple years there. He's an awesome young man. ... He works his tail off. He's a great teammate, and he loves ball."

Hughes, a senior, remembers meticulously studying Taylor's playbook as an underclassman at William & Mary. Hughes saw it evolve to another level following Taylor's two-year stint with the Bills.

"When I was at William & Mary when I was younger, even though I wasn't the (starter), I was always spending time with him and always trying to pick his brain, because he's a really bright guy," Hughes said. "He's a football scientist. When I was a freshman in college, I was like, 'Damn, this is a lot of stuff.'"

"When he left (for Buffalo), I got to experience football in a different

lens. ... When he was in Buffalo, I'd reach out to him sometimes spontaneously, and we'd talk back and forth, but we did not expect to be in Wyoming with each other. Shoot, when I got the call to come be a Cowboy and come play for him and (UW head coach Jay Sawvel), that was a no-brainer.

"... He's a developer. I believe in him. I've seen it. I won a championship with him. I've seen it from the back seat, and I just want to do it again."

Taylor worked with Bills quarterback Josh Allen last season. Taylor was also in Buffalo when the former Wyoming quarterback won NFL MVP. Did Taylor's experience in the pros change the way he calls plays?

"There's a lot of different wrinkles and things that he's accumulated







UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

**University of Wyoming offensive coordinator Christian Taylor, left, talks to wide receiver Eric Richardson during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.**

from his time in the NFL, which we didn't have the first time," Hughes said. "Coach Taylor has always been a super-bright guy and has always been a great coach. Now with him coming back from the NFL and the way that he's seeing things and how to manipulate certain things, it's like, 'Dang.' ... Some concepts that we ran (during spring and fall camp), we did not have at William & Mary."

Hughes and Taylor weren't

brought in for each other. The pair will be responsible for rejuvenating a Wyoming offense that has been one of the worst in the country over the past two seasons.

The Cowboys ranked 108th in passing offense (183 yards per game), 129th in points per game (16), 98th in rushing offense (131.3 yards per game) and 120th in total offense (314.3 yards per game) in 2025. That led to their second consecutive losing season following



LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

**Quarterback Tyler Hughes, left, and offensive coordinator Christian Taylor reunited in Laramie after spending time together at William & Mary.**



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

**University of Wyoming offensive coordinator Christian Taylor, left, runs a drill with tight end Tyler Hampton during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.**

a nine-win campaign in 2023.

"In this program, there are a number of things that need to be fixed, one of which is the fact that, offensively, we've been poor the last two years," Sawvel said. "So, that's something that needed to get fixed, and we're working on that. I think we're going to be in a better space with that, but we have to continue to bring execution levels up.

"... There's been too many times over the last two years in this program where, in the fourth quarter, we haven't risen to the occasion. When you're not doing anything offensively, it's hard to win close games. From Idaho being a four-point loss to Boise being a four-point loss to San Diego State being a three-point loss to Utah State being a two-point loss to Nevada being a six-point loss to Air Force being a three-point loss, when you go back through all that, (those are) times that we have to win. That's the challenge right now."

Former UW offensive coordinator Jay Johnson was not retained after being relieved of play-calling duties midway through last year. Former starting quarterback Kaden Anderson entered the transfer portal after finishing last season 118th out of 123 qualifying

quarterbacks nationally in passing efficiency.

Sawvel's message to Hughes, Taylor and the rest of the offense is pretty straightforward going into the 2026 campaign.

"I want to score a bunch of points," Sawvel said. "I don't give a (expletive) if it's somebody from the band that plays for us. I just want to score a bunch of points. ... I'm 5-3 as the head coach here when we scored 21 points. That's a terrible bar. Twenty-one points is low. When you sit there and look at that, that means 16 times we haven't gotten to that. That's disgusting.

"... The last two years in this program, we put too much strain on the offensive line and we were too easy to defend. ... The University of Wyoming hasn't been in the top 80 in total offense since Josh Allen was here. Last I checked, that's been a couple years. He's got his jersey retired. Normally you don't do that the year after somebody leaves, so it's been a while.

"We have to get that part right. I like the space that we're in offensively. I like the fact that we've got some players that can be threats. ... There are just a lot of players that can hit home runs, and we need to be able to unlock that."





UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming cornerback Tyson Shamsid-Deen talks with Cowboys coach Jay Sawvel during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.

# CAN AARON BOHL'S DEFENSE DO IT AGAIN?

By ALEX TAYLOR

WyoSports

**T**here was a lone bright spot during the University of Wyoming's 4-8 campaign in 2025.

The Cowboys' defense finished 30th nationally at 20.5 points allowed per game, which included two shutouts in the same season for the first time since 1966. The unit did all it could to keep its offensive counterparts in games before eventually running out of gas in the fourth quarter.

UW's defense lost a handful of key pieces to graduation and the transfer portal this offseason.

What is third-year head coach Jay Sawvel's expectation for the unit going into the new campaign?

"From what I see from us from a personnel standpoint, we could be the best defense that we've had since I've been at Wyoming this year," Sawvel said.

The Cowboys return linebacker Ethan Stuhlsatz, who is primed to take over at middle linebacker. Three key pieces also return on the defensive line, with defensive tackles Jayden Williams, Dante Drake and Caleb Robinson.

Drake and Robinson missed all of last year with injuries.

Jones Thomas, a safety, and

nickelback Desman Hearn are the Cowboys' lone returning starters, but Sawvel added a handful of experienced players via the transfer portal at several positions. That includes three Football Championship Subdivision transfers at defensive end.

The formula of supplementing the roster with FCS transfers paid dividends last fall. That included linebackers Stuhlsatz, Evan Eller and Brayden Johnson, and defensive backs Hearn and Dainsus Miller.

Some of the credit belongs

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**From what I see from us from a personnel standpoint, we could be the best defense that we've had since I've been at Wyoming this year.**

---

to defensive coordinator Aaron Bohl for putting people in the right position to be successful, according to Sawvel.

"Aaron did a really good job last year. Our entire defensive staff did," Sawvel said. "It's a really good defensive staff when you look at: Aaron Bohl, he's really sharp. He's gotten much better with just the calling of a game and how he wants to adjust within a game.

"Jason Petrino is an outstanding (safeties) coach. I really liked hiring (cornerbacks coach) JB Hall. He's great. Then having (defensive



ends coach Brian Hendricks and defensive tackles coach Deonte Gibson) work with the front, it's a really, really good defensive staff. That's been part of the reason we've been able to recruit very well defensively, both in the portal and also in high school."

Bohl, UW's third-year defensive coordinator after a promotion from linebackers coach, centers his philosophy on physicality and toughness. But those qualities sometimes present themselves in different shapes and sizes.

"The toughness level also includes the fact that, if you go out there in a game and maybe for the first two series and things don't go right, how do you come back?" Sawvel said. "(It's not just about) your level of physical toughness when a guy is in front of you and how you move him and how you get off a block, but also, as a group, if we didn't succeed on the first drive of a game, what's the resolve of the group to then do their job?"

"A big part of this defense comes down to we have talent at all the different levels. There's not a level that we're lacking right now. In 2023, we weren't good at corner and we won nine games, but I went into every game scared (expletive) about how we were going to do certain things at corner. In 2024, we didn't have depth, and then we all the sudden got injured, and (the lack of depth) got magnified. Last year, our depth was better, and we got better corner play. This year, we have talent at all those levels."

Bohl still coaches UW's linebackers, which is the defense's most important position when it comes to communication. His hands-on approach is what sticks out the most to redshirt freshman Parker Moore.

"He actually teaches you how to do it," Moore said. "I obviously took visits to other places, and there was nowhere like here, where a coach was going to really help me improve as a player and not just be like, 'Oh, we're trying to win games,



WYOMING TRIBUNE EAGLE FILE

**University of Wyoming's Jay Sawvel is looking to turn things around going into his third season as the Cowboys' head coach.**

and that's it.'

"He really focuses on us with every little detail. We have this model with the three big things about defense, and it's about leverage, effort and physicality. He harps those on us all the time, and that just makes you a better linebacker."

The Cowboys aren't just looking to improve on scoring defense. They finished 45th nationally in total defense (344.2 yards allowed per game), 31st in third-down defense and 14th in passing yards allowed (175.5).

"We're deeper, bigger, more physical on the defensive line than we've been at any point since I've been here, and we're deeper and more talented in the secondary than what we've been," Sawvel said. "Now, we're inexperienced at corner. There's talent, but there's inexperience. So, we've got to get that caught up."

"There's a lot of coaching to do, but when I look at the pieces ... I really am optimistic that we could become better than what we've been." "I was really excited when he got the job. No disrespect to our coach last year, but I feel like me and Bouknight had a stronger relationship, and I feel like he can develop me into a great player."

Building relationships is a key component to being a college



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

**University of Wyoming defensive tackles coach Deonte Gibson talks to his group during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.**

coach in the transfer portal era. While teaching technique is step one, getting to know his players off the field goes a long way in Bouknight's ability to retain his top talent with the Cowboys.

"From the beginning of time, relationships have mattered, but it's even more important today," Bouknight said. "Now, kids will be more enticed with money and these agents who are now getting to the parents, so, if you don't have any type of relationship with a kid and he's somewhat productive, you're going to lose him. Not to say that you can't lose him regardless, but it sure helps a whole lot more when you have a relationship and the kid doesn't want to leave you. That makes it a little bit harder on the kid."

Learning from a UW Hall of Famer is an invaluable resource for an up-and-coming star like Durr. Knowing his coach performed at the highest level in a Cowboys uniform gives players like Durr the ultimate trust that he has his best interest in mind.

"He gives me the blueprint, I just need to put it out on tape and put it out on the field," Durr said. "(He's taught me) I just need to maximize every opportunity I get. He puts his neck out there and sticks up for me. He'll say, 'Can Chris get this play? Can Chris get this play?' I just

need to maximize that and prove him right."

Bouknight's exactness rubs off on his players. Central Missouri transfer Michael Fitzgerald noticed that before he even signed with the Cowboys during the recruiting process.

"He's always willing to teach you exactly how you're supposed to do it," Fitzgerald said. "He's willing to come in for extra work if you need anything and meet with you. He just wants you to put in as much work (as he does so he knows) you care about it."

"As long as you're working, he'll coach you along and be hard on you. That's what makes you great."

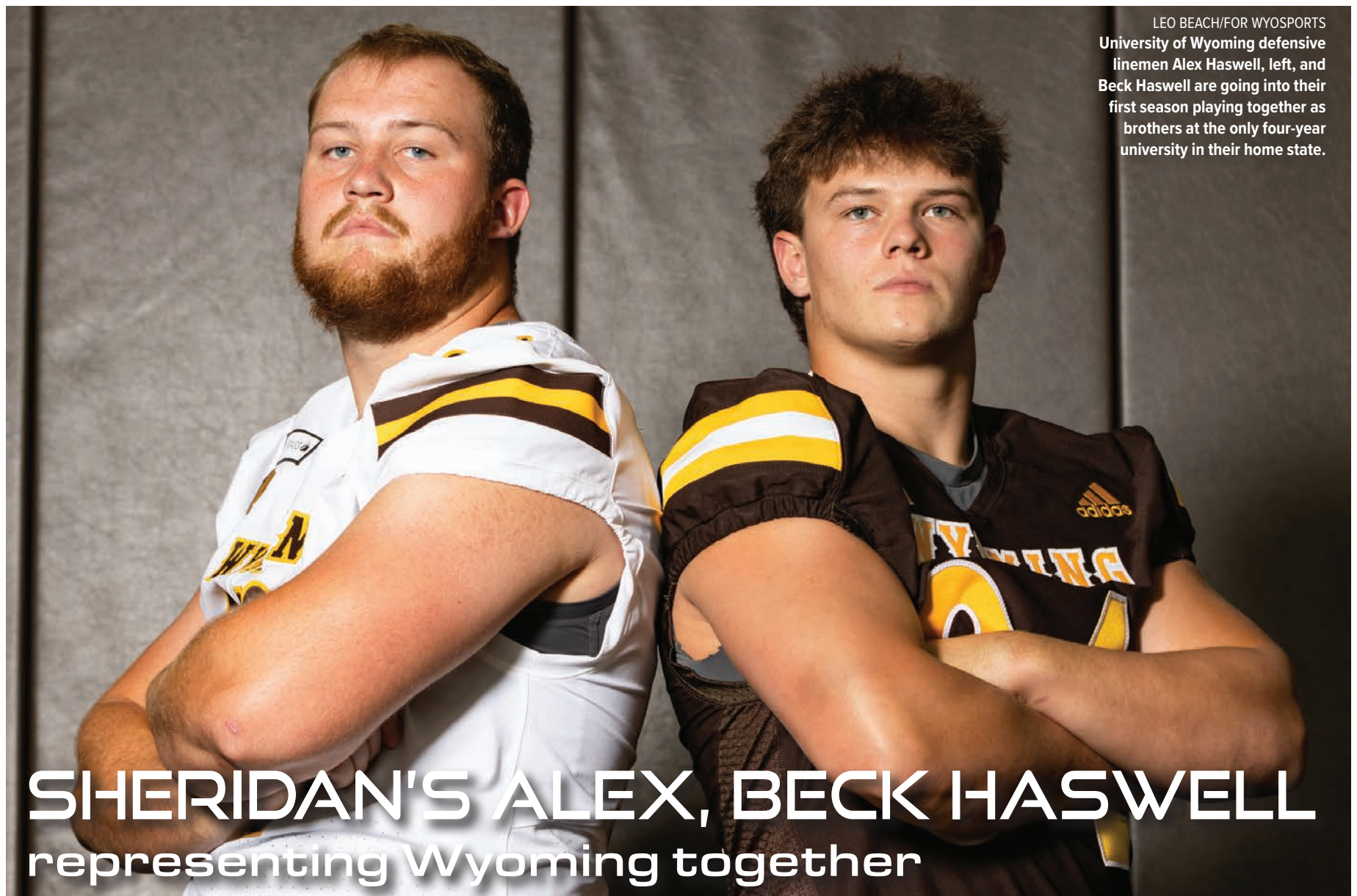
Going into his first season in charge of the wide receivers at his alma mater, Bouknight knows he has a talented group. The biggest obstacle now is putting in the work to translate that talent into wins.

"It's potential right now," Bouknight said. "Right now, we have a lot of guys that we've seen in the spring, and some at the end of last year. So, the potential is there, but we have to continue to build."

"If we don't execute on game days, it doesn't mean anything for us. You can have three, four or five studs out there, and if the other six aren't clicking, we ain't going nowhere."



LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS  
University of Wyoming defensive  
linemen Alex Haswell, left, and  
Beck Haswell are going into their  
first season playing together as  
brothers at the only four-year  
university in their home state.



# SHERIDAN'S ALEX, BECK HASWELL

## representing Wyoming together

By **ALEX TAYLOR**  
WyoSports

**B**eck and Alex Haswell made a conscious effort to keep their distance after reuniting in the same football program this summer.

That course of action took a hit when the brothers were given their locker assignments in the University of Wyoming's dressing room.

"I kind of expected that I'd be around him a lot," Beck said. "But every day when I'm sitting over in the locker room and I look up, we're directly across from each other. We can't really keep space from each other anymore."

Beck joined the Cowboys as a freshman defensive end

this summer. Alex, a redshirt sophomore, made a full-time move to defensive tackle. They hail from Sheridan.

"It's a little weird (playing with your little brother in college), to be honest, but it's pretty cool seeing him out there," the younger Haswell said. "I'm seeing him in pads for the first time since my senior year back in Sheridan. It's been a lot of fun."

The brothers are plenty familiar with winning. Neither lost a single varsity game throughout high school, which played a big part in their recruitment to the only four-year university in their home state.

The Broncs are riding a 55-game winning streak into this season, which is the third-longest active streak in the country. Sheridan

boasts five consecutive Class 4A state titles.

"The coaches in Sheridan do a great job of making the kids understand what you have to do and what you have to sacrifice to be a winning program," Beck Haswell said. "Obviously, this isn't Wyoming high school football anymore, so you're going to have to sacrifice more and bring that to a higher level. But it's a really cool thing to know what it takes to win. I'm hoping that, at some point, that culture can come here."

Alex Haswell missed all of last season with an injury, and suffered another minor setback during the spring. He is fully cleared and pushing for playing time on the defensive line.

"Alex is fully healthy," third-year head coach Jay Sawvel said. "He had a knee injury at the end of the spring that was a short-term injury. So, he had a full summer of working out. Alex is up over 290 pounds, he works very hard, and has a high level of care."

"... Jayden Williams, Caleb Robinson and Dante Drake, those probably should be your top three defensive tackles. One of the biggest things we have to figure out is: who's No. 4-8? At some point, No. 5 and No. 6 end up being No. 3 and No. 4 during a season. That's a big thing, and Alex is in that mix. ... This is a big (fall camp for Alex). We're trying to see who's durable, who's reliable and who's consistent."



Alex Haswell knows much of his football future relies on this season. The former 4A lineman of the year and all-state selection has plenty of competition pushing him at defensive tackle.

“(This fall camp is) huge,” he said. “I’d argue that, right now, the (defensive tackle) group has the most depth. There are a lot of guys that can play, and there are a lot of guys that can get to that level that can play. I’m really just trying to show that I have what it takes. ... This is the best I’ve felt, mentally and physically.”

Beck Haswell’s goals are vastly different as a freshman. He was Wyoming’s top-rated recruit after recording 41 tackles, 10 tackles for loss and six sacks as a senior. He also played quarterback when he wasn’t lined up at running back or tight end.

“(Playing quarterback) was honestly a lot of fun,” he said. “The quarterback plays for me, I didn’t really have to read anything. I just threw it as far as I could.”

His focus now isn’t scoring touchdowns. It’s getting up to speed as a full-time participant on the defensive line.

“I would say my ability to read a play and the ability to read (an offensive tackle) is behind because, in high school, I never really did any of that. I just pinned my ears back and went,” Beck Haswell said. “(My goal) is just learning how to play football at this level. I feel like I did a good job of physically getting up to a level where I could compete in the three months I’ve been here, and I’m hoping to use that as much as I can.”

The brothers shared a dream growing up. Suiting up in the brown and gold on Saturdays is what most Wyoming kids picture while climbing the youth football ranks. The significance of their position now isn’t lost on them.

“Growing up in Wyoming, this is the place you want to be,” Beck Haswell said. “It’s a good thing to not have to worry about all this transfer portal stuff. I want to be

here. I want to play here for my entire career, because this is what I dreamed of as a kid, to make it to this level and play at Wyoming. ... Seeing guys like (Douglas’ Tegen Seeds) and Alex and the guys that you watched play high school football above you (is special).”

“It still shocks me every day,” Alex Haswell added. “Last year, even though I was out for half the season, for all of the home games, just seeing all the fans, it blew me away every time.”

Longtime UW head coach Craig Bohl made it a personal mission to keep Wyoming’s top talent in state. His son, Aaron, carries the same philosophy entering this third year as the Cowboys’ defensive coordinator.

“It’s huge for a couple reasons,” Aaron said. “No. 1, those guys can develop so much. Look at how much weight Alex has put on and even Beck has put on. Those guys develop at a high rate, and you’re also finding guys who care so much about being here. That goes a long way for not just them – because they can just fight through anything – but also it shows a guy who is not from this area what it’s like to play for this place and how important it is.

“Their buy-in also brings up everyone else’s around them. It sucks in this age with losing the walk-ons, because there were so many spots for that, and there were so many stories from that, but what it does is, we have a lot of guys that can play for us and play good football for us in this state. We just have to find them.”

While it may have seemed like a longshot to both end up on the same Division I roster growing up, now that it’s a reality, the brothers wouldn’t have it any other way.

“We have a love/hate relationship, but in football, we come together a lot more,” Beck Haswell said. “We’re not really butting heads out there. We’re always working toward the same goal, which is good.

“It’s a really cool thing to be able to look next to you in practice (and



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

**University of Wyoming defensive tackle Alex Haswell jogs between drills during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.**

see your brother). That happened in practice (during fall camp). We were both on the line, and I had to make a

call to move him over. Just realizing that that was my brother, that was a really cool thing.”

A promotional advertisement for HomeBase Laramie. At the top, a yellow pennant with a cowboy silhouette and the text "GO COWBOYS!" is shown. Below it is a photograph of the HomeBase Laramie store, a large white building with a red roof and a sign that reads "HomeBase LARAMIE'S HOME IMPROVEMENT WAREHOUSE". The main body of the ad is a light brown background with the text "WINNING BRANDS AT HomeBase LARAMIE". Below this, a grid of brand logos is displayed: Priefert, STIHL, Milwaukee, YETI, BAD BOY MOWERS, DEWALT, EGO, recteq, OAKLEY, Scotts, valspar, and FEIT ELECTRIC. At the bottom, the HomeBase Laramie logo is repeated on the left, and the store's address and hours are listed on the right: "756 N. 3rd St. | Laramie, WY 82072 (307) 395-2900 | HomeBaseUSA.com Mon.-Sat. 7:30am – 8pm | Sun. 9am-6pm".





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# TYLER HUGHES

looking to lift Cowboys' offense to higher level

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming quarterback Tyler Hughes is looking to provide a spark after transferring from William & Mary this offseason.

By ALEX TAYLOR  
WyoSports

It'll be Tyler Hughes' offense when the University of Wyoming opens the season Sept. 5 at Colorado State.

The William & Mary transfer has accounted for 37 touchdowns through his four-year career. Hughes earned the starting job for the Tribe last fall, breaking out for 2,330 yards and 20 touchdowns to just three interceptions. He added 670 yards and 11 scores on the ground.

"We're going to have to chase him out of the building, and that's what you want in quarterbacks," third-year head coach Jay Sawvel said. "You don't want to have to tell a guy to

come in the building, you want to chase that guy out of the building. He's that way, and I think that's been obvious (since he got here)."

While Hughes is the favorite to win the starting job, Sawvel won't officially name his No. 1 quarterback until Week 1.

"There's going to be a battle for everything right now," Sawvel said. "There's going to be a battle for everything that we do, whether that's running back or quarterback. Does Tyler Hughes have a great skillset and had a really good spring and put himself in a very good position to be the starter quarterback? Yes, he did.

"But he better play well in fall camp because there are other guys who

are going to try to take that spot."

Hughes is looking to breathe life back into a stagnant Cowboys offense that finished No. 129 nationally at 16 points per game last fall. Hughes' dual-threat capabilities will be something first-year offensive coordinator Christian Taylor leans on while calling plays.

"It's tough (to defend)," Hughes said about his ability to pick up yards both through the air and on the ground. "Defenses can play coverage very well, and then I see the hole and I'm running for 30 yards. It's a tough thing.

"What do you choose? Do you choose to put a guy in coverage, or do you drop out? Or are you going to



LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS



**DRUBE:**

20-38 (52.6%), 187 YARDS,  
1 INTERCEPTION

**SIMS:**

6-8 (75%), 38 YARDS, 1 TOUCHDOWN

**HUGHES:**

204-308 (66.2%), 2,330 YARDS,  
20 TOUCHDOWNS, 3 INTERCEPTIONS  
[WILLIAM & MARY]

|             |      |     |     |
|-------------|------|-----|-----|
| MASON DRUBE | RFR. | 6-3 | 222 |
| LANDON SIMS | JR.  | 6-3 | 217 |

|                                             |     |     |     |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| TYLER HUGHES<br>[WILLIAM & MARY]            | SR. | 6-0 | 210 |
| TAYLOR HASSELBECK<br>[NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE] | FR. | 6-2 | 180 |
| TYLER FRANKLIN<br>[FRESNO, CALIFORNIA]      | FR. | 6-3 | 175 |



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming quarterback Tyler Hughes has his photo taken during Mountain West media days Wednesday, July 15, 2026, in Las Vegas.



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming quarterback Tyler Hughes runs for a gain of 45 yards during the team's spring game Saturday, April 25, 2026, at War Memorial Stadium.

spy me? All that stuff takes away from coverage.”

Returners Landon Sims and Mason Drube will compete for the backup spot after both saw limited action last fall. Sims was on the cusp of taking over the starting job before suffering a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee for the third time in his career.

Sims returned ahead of schedule and was a limited participant in spring ball. He was 6-of-8 for 38 yards and a touchdown last season, adding 97 yards and a score on 15

carries.

Drube took the majority of the snaps in a season-ending loss to Hawaii. He was 20-of-38 for 187 yards and an interception on the season, adding 21 yards on the ground.

“It’s important for us to have, No. 1, the competition to push each other to make people better,” Sawvel said. “The better Mason Drube gets, the better Tyler Hughes has to play. The better Landon Sims eventually gets, the better that both of them have to play.

“... I’m happy with that group right now. They’re uber competitive, and they pick it up really well. (Christian Taylor) does a great job with them.”

Added Taylor: “No. 1, all of (the quarterbacks) love football, and No. 2, they’re all very intelligent. They have football instincts, so they’ve caught onto the offense very quickly.”

The Cowboys also added a pair of freshmen in the room, including Taylor Hasselbeck (Nashville, Tennessee) and Tyler Franklin (Fresno, California). Hasselbeck tore an ACL during a summer workout

and will miss the 2026 season.

Franklin was a late addition following Hasselbeck’s injury. He originally signed with Fresno City College before committing to UW in July.

“The disappointment for Taylor (Hasselbeck), No. 1, is he’s a football junkie, and I appreciate that part of it,” Sawvel said. “... He’s going to be really good. I’ve seen him throw. I’ve seen him do things. He’s going to be a really good player, but the disappointing thing will be that he’s not getting fall camp development.”



# HARRIS, HOLMAN

to lead Wyoming's backfield

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming running back Samuel Harris is back after a productive freshman season for the Cowboys.

By **ALEX TAYLOR**  
WyoSports

It's been four seasons since a University of Wyoming running back eclipsed 1,000 yards.

Sophomore Samuel Harris is looking to change that after a standout freshman year with the Cowboys. The Cibolo, Texas, native led UW with 558 yards and one touchdown on 100 carries (5.6 yards per rush). He added 16 catches for 184 yards.

Harris took over the starting job just three games into his college career. He ran for 126 yards on 19 carries in his first career start at Colorado, which earned him his second consecutive Mountain West freshman of the week award.

His standout rookie season landed him on the Maxwell Award watch list, which honors the top player in college football.

"There was really no reason for me to leave (Wyoming)," Harris told WyoSports in March. "I felt like I was in a pretty good position with the program, the coaching staff and everyone else here. I wouldn't rather go play with anybody else. I just want to win that Mountain West championship this year, so that's on my mind, and that's why I'm still here."

Harris' role dwindled down the stretch last fall due to a meniscus injury in his right knee. He had minor surgery this offseason to repair the damage, which limited his reps

during the spring camp.

"I'm feeling really good," Harris said. "I've always been a confident person, but actually going out there last year and being able to perform (was important). I don't think I performed my best, but being able to go out there and make an impact for the team, help us make some plays and win some games (built my confidence). I'm coming into this year with a full head of steam and with no doubt in my mind that there's nothing I can't do."

Western Illinois transfer Markell Holman was the biggest beneficiary of Harris' absence in the spring. The senior is expected to complement Harris in a one-two backfield, and he has the experience to do so after

tallying 1,377 all-purpose yards and nine touchdowns last season. Those numbers earned him All-Ohio Valley Conference honors.

"Big fan of Markell Holman," Sawvel said in April. "It became pretty obvious to us quickly why he rushed for over 1,000 yards where he was at (last year). ... He's got really good vision. Really, really good vision, and he's got very good hands."

"He had 39 catches last year, along with 1,000 yards rushing. So, there's a versatility to him. ... He's a 210-pound back, which helps that process, too. I'm really glad he's here. He's going to play a lot of football for us."

A handful of running backs are



2025 STATISTICS

HARRIS:

100 CARRIES, 558 YARDS, 5.6  
AVERAGE, 1 TOUCHDOWN

HOLMAN:

231 CARRIES, 1,064 YARDS, 4.6  
AVERAGE, 7 TOUCHDOWNS

HUBBARD:

96 CARRIES, 335 YARDS, 3.5  
AVERAGE, 4 TOUCHDOWNS

RETURNING

PLAYERS

|                |      |      |     |
|----------------|------|------|-----|
| SAMUEL HARRIS  | SO.  | 5-11 | 196 |
| NICO HAMILTON  | SO,  | 5-10 | 207 |
| DONTAE BURCH   | SO.  | 5-7  | 190 |
| NIKOS VARELAS  | JR.  | 5-10 | 194 |
| JADEN LAWRENCE | RFR. | 5-10 | 202 |

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

NEWCOMERS

|                                      |     |      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|
| MARKELL HOLMAN<br>[WESTERN ILLINOIS] | SR. | 6-0  | 210 |
| DIORE HUBBARD<br>[WEST VIRGINIA]     | SO. | 5-10 | 190 |
| RYKEN BANKS<br>[PARKER, COLORADO]    | FR. | 6-0  | 185 |



TROY BABBITT/UW ATHLETICS

University of Wyoming running back Samuel Harris runs with the ball during a game against Air Force on Saturday, Oct. 18, 2025, at the Air Force Academy in Colorado.

looking to slither into the rotation. Sophomores Nico Hamilton and Dontae Burch had productive spring camps, and redshirt freshman Jaden Lawrence could provide another depth piece. Hamilton looks to be the top candidate for the No. 3 spot.

“(Hamilton) came in and told me in December, ‘Coach, I’m going to be a whole lot better version of myself in the spring. You won’t even recognize me,’” Sawvel said. “A lot of guys will say that, but they don’t follow

through with it.

“His offseason was outstanding. Every number that he’s had, from a physical (standpoint), he’s completely shattered this offseason, starting with just how his body looks. You can tell he’s trimmed down, but also, he weighs more. He’s faster. He’s stronger. I really, really like the step that he’s taken, and I’m really looking forward to (the rest of the offseason), because there’s a skillset there.”

Another wildcard is sophomore Diore Hubbard, who transferred from West Virginia after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament. He still finished as the Mountaineers’ leading rusher with 335 yards and four touchdowns on 96 carries. He added 16 catches for 156 yards.

UW’s offense was a complete disappointment a year ago, and that included the running game. The Cowboys were ninth in the MW at 131.7 yards per game, which was their third consecutive season finishing outside the top five in the conference.

“We need to run the ball a whole lot better than what we have. That’s first and foremost,” Sawvel said. “That’s not bagging on the offensive line. It’s the fact that we have to help our linemen in a number of ways through different schemes and through different things formationally. ... There’s a need to



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming running back Markell Holman runs through a drill during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.

be able to run the ball and have a variety and a versatility in how we do it.”





# COWBOYS ENTER SEASON

## shorthanded at offensive line

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming offensive linemen Rex Johnsen, left, and Jason Maciejczak are set to lead the Cowboys' offensive line this fall.

By ALEX TAYLOR  
WyoSports

Several University of Wyoming offensive linemen suffered injuries before ever taking a snap.

Brandt Rice, who played just one game since coming to Laramie in 2023, will miss “a period of time” after breaking an ankle in a moped accident this summer, according to head coach Jay Sawvel. Jake

Davies won’t be available to practice until September with a lingering foot injury from last season. He played in 18 games over the past two seasons.

Nathan Geiger is also expected to miss extended time — and potentially the season — after tearing an anterior cruciate ligament for a second time last fall.

On top of the injuries, Chandler Donaway, who was expected to start at guard after transferring

from East Texas A&M, missed the beginning of fall camp for personal reasons. He returned to practice midway through fall camp.

The depth concerns are real for Sawvel. He listed Jason Maciejczak, Rex Johnsen, Braylon Jenkins, Giovanni Panozzo, Josiah Petaia, Calvin Janssen, Johnathan Bush, Caleb Hall and Quinn Grovesteen-Matchey as the top nine during the first week of fall camp.

“We’re looking at, ‘OK, what’s

our best combination of putting everybody in there?” Sawvel said. “Offensive line depth is a concern in this program because, right now, you have one entire offensive line recruiting class where nobody practiced with the first or second group (to start fall camp). ... You can’t absorb that for the long term. ... Some fixes, like the O-line thing, have taken time. ... It takes time to develop. (It also) takes money to just go out and get an offensive



|                                               |            |            |            |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>JASON MACIEJCZAK</b><br>[NEBRASKA]         | <b>JR.</b> | <b>6-3</b> | <b>314</b> |
| <b>CHANDLER DONAWAY</b><br>[EAST TEXAS A&M]   | <b>SR.</b> | <b>6-1</b> | <b>30</b>  |
| <b>JONATHAN PEARCY</b><br>[LIBERTY, MISSOURI] | <b>FR.</b> | <b>6-3</b> | <b>305</b> |
| <b>GRANT LOTT</b><br>[ST. PETER'S, MISSOURI]  | <b>FR.</b> | <b>6-4</b> | <b>286</b> |
| <b>JACKSON GARRETT</b><br>[CHEYENNE]          | <b>FR.</b> | <b>6-3</b> | <b>290</b> |
| <b>COOPER LAWSON</b><br>[STAR VALLEY]         | <b>FR.</b> | <b>6-7</b> | <b>255</b> |

lineman in the transfer portal. They're not cheap."

Johnsen is the leader of the group after starting all 12 games last season. He earned a preseason All-Mountain West nod and has played in 32 career games, all at UW. He'll be joined in the leadership department by Maciejczak, who transferred from Nebraska and is likely the Cowboys' starting center.

"There's eight guys that we can go into a game and potentially do something with right now and play with," Sawvel said. "I feel good with the first group that runs out there, and I feel good about a couple of the backups that are in those spaces comparatively to where we've been and what we need to be.

"But we need more, and we have to continue to develop that. The hope would be, at some point here in the near future, Jake Davies comes back and can give us another body. That would be important. The hope would be that Quinn can be full-go and do that over an extended period of time to give us another guy."

Another wrinkle in UW's offensive line room is the change at offensive coordinator. Sawvel hired Christian Taylor to replace Jay Johnson in

January, and part of the reason was his philosophy of making each offensive lineman's job easier.

"We needed to take pressure off of our offensive line," Sawvel said. "There was a complete revamp that needed to happen offensively in this program, and that revamp is the fact that we thought we made it too hard on our offensive line because we didn't have a quarterback run game.

"The second thing was, some of the things that we were running, you had to block damn-near perfect to get six yards. That's not what we want. So, we've completely remade that and changed that, and hopefully that takes pressure off of the offensive line."

While depth may be a concern going into the season, that's not a problem unique to UW.

"Every college team in the country wants more offensive linemen," Taylor said. "It's a national shortage. Going into a season, if you had 7-8 (playable) guys, that's probably a realistic expectation. That's wishful (thinking) a little bit, too, but if we can get it to 7-8, that'd be great, and then you just pray you stay healthy."

|                                |             |            |            |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| <b>GIOVANNI PANOZZO</b>        | <b>SO.</b>  | <b>6-5</b> | <b>308</b> |
| <b>KALVIN JANSSEN,</b>         | <b>RFR.</b> | <b>6-3</b> | <b>302</b> |
| <b>SPENCER RATHBUN</b>         | <b>SO.</b>  | <b>6-4</b> | <b>272</b> |
| <b>BRAYLON JENKINS</b>         | <b>SO.</b>  | <b>6-4</b> | <b>314</b> |
| <b>BRANDT RICE</b>             | <b>JR.</b>  | <b>6-5</b> | <b>306</b> |
| <b>NATHAN GEIGER</b>           | <b>JR.</b>  | <b>6-5</b> | <b>295</b> |
| <b>JOHNATHAN BUSH</b>          | <b>RFR.</b> | <b>6-2</b> | <b>303</b> |
| <b>REX JOHNSEN</b>             | <b>SR.</b>  | <b>6-5</b> | <b>310</b> |
| <b>CALEB HALL</b>              | <b>SO.</b>  | <b>6-5</b> | <b>305</b> |
| <b>TARIQ MILLER</b>            | <b>RFR.</b> | <b>6-3</b> | <b>295</b> |
| <b>COOPER LAWSON</b>           | <b>RFR.</b> | <b>6-4</b> | <b>299</b> |
| <b>JOSIAH PETAIA</b>           | <b>JR.</b>  | <b>6-3</b> | <b>311</b> |
| <b>JAKE DAVIES</b>             | <b>JR.</b>  | <b>6-7</b> | <b>305</b> |
| <b>QUINN GROVESTEN-MATCHEY</b> | <b>JR.</b>  | <b>6-6</b> | <b>313</b> |



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming offensive line coach Joe Tripodi talks to his group during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.



# WILSON, FRENDT

## headline Cowboys' new-look TE room

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming tight ends Kyle Frendt, left, and Jake Wilson are primed for big roles in Christian Taylor's new offense.

By **ALEX TAYLOR**  
WyoSports

**F**irst-year University of Wyoming offensive coordinator Christian Taylor hasn't been shy about his intentions when it comes to tight ends.

That's likely music to Cowboys fans' ears with the lack of production at the position over the past decade.

"Tight end is one of our favorite positions, because they can do so many things," Taylor said. "They can line up at tight end, receiver, running back. They can block, they

can run every route. A couple of the guys we have are super versatile, with great size and a great skillset.

"To be able to utilize them in a lot of ways, you've got to be a pretty smart football player, and (tight ends coach Shannon Moore) has been doing a great job with them. They've been doing a great job picking up the system."

Jake Wilson is back after missing all of last season with a knee injury. He's expected atop the depth chart, followed closely behind by Kyle Frendt, who played in nine games as a true freshman in 2025.

"Kyle Frendt is a player that has a really high ceiling with great speed and catching ability," third-year head coach Jay Sawvel said. "... Jake Wilson is a guy that has a lot of abilities. He's physical, he can catch and he can run. So, we're really excited about him. With Kyle, the combination of the two – along with Christian Taylor embracing big personnels and multiplicities of what we do with players – I think those two could have outstanding seasons."

The Cowboys added senior Tyler Siddons out of Northwestern

State this offseason. Gage Brook is another new addition to the room after transitioning from quarterback this spring. He caught a 5-yard touchdown in UW's annual spring scrimmage.

"He looks pretty good at the position," Sawvel said. "He has a lot of learning to do. He has to improve as a blocker, but he runs well, and his ball skills for the position have been surprising. He's a big target, so, all of a sudden, it's like we picked up a potential guy that can do certain things for us."

Landon Pace is another candidate



2025

## STATISTICS

**FRENDT:**

2 CATCHES, 25 YARDS, 12.5 AVERAGE

**SCHOENFELD:**

1 CATCH, 8 YARDS, 8.0 AVERAGE

**SIDDONS:**

5 CATCHES, 55 YARDS, 11.0 AVERAGE

(NORTHWESTERN STATE)

RETURNING

## PLAYERS

|                  |      |     |     |
|------------------|------|-----|-----|
| TYLER HAMPTON    | SR.  | 6-4 | 246 |
| GAGE BROOK       | JR.  | 6-4 | 240 |
| KYLE FRENDT      | SO.  | 6-5 | 236 |
| ISAAC SCHOENFELD | SR.  | 6-5 | 257 |
| LANDON PACE      | RFR. | 6-3 | 247 |
| JAKE WILSON      | SO.  | 6-5 | 242 |

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

## NEWCOMERS

|                                       |     |     |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| TYLER SIDDONS<br>(NORTHWESTERN STATE) | SR. | 6-5 | 256 |
| ISHMAEL MUHAMMAD<br>(DALLAS)          | FR. | 6-3 | 210 |
| COLLIN FORD<br>(NAPERVILLE, ILLINOIS) | FR. | 6-4 | 215 |



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming tight end Jake Wilson catches a pass during a spring practice at War Memorial Stadium.



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming tight end Kyle Frendt lines up before a play during a spring practice at War Memorial Stadium.

for playing time. He got plenty of practice reps during the spring, including a few in the backfield at full back.

"Landon has a role, and he has a role that we can get to offensively here," Sawvel said. "He's worked hard, and he's a good football player. ... Not only can he play tight end, but there's also some fullback-type capabilities that Landon can do and provide for us. That (versatility) is always a big piece."

For Taylor, he plans on utilizing the tight ends in a way that helps in both the running and passing game.

"Jake Wilson and Kyle Frendt are phenomenal athletes that have the skill set to do everything. I'm super excited for them," Taylor said. "It's going to be a position-less offense where guys can line up anywhere, so tight ends can be all over the field. Their skill sets are really exciting."

"Landon Pace will have a good

role. He's a smart football player, has good ball skills and is a physical player. The guys behind them all have positive qualities, so it'll be interesting (during fall camp) to see their development."

That idea of lining up all across the field is an exciting challenge for a competitor like Wilson.

"It's really exciting with the things we get to do," he said. "There's so

many different things. We can be in the backfield, we can be included in options, we're lead blockers at fullback, we're lining up at wideout, and we're running posts, so it's awesome.

"... I'm having a lot of opportunities. It's really diverse. All the positions have to know how to do everything, and that's what I really like about this offense."

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# SAWVEL STILL LOOKING

for WRs who rise to occasion

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming wide receivers Eric Richardson, left, and Jackson Holman are seeking bigger roles after returning to the Cowboys for a second season.

By ALEX TAYLOR  
WyoSports

Opportunities for wide receivers were few and far between for the University of Wyoming's offense last fall.

The Cowboys finished 111th in the country in passing offense at 183 yards, largely in part to stagnant quarterback play. Third-year head coach Jay Sawvel is looking to change that this time around after replacing Jay Johnson with Christian Taylor at offensive coordinator.

The Cowboys lost their top wideout, Chris Durr Jr., to Maryland this offseason. The junior led UW with 45 catches for 469 yards and four touchdowns a year ago.

The top returners at the position

are Jackson Holman (13 catches, 139 yards), Eric Richardson (10 catches, 112 yards, one touchdown) and Deion DeBlanc (17 catches, 90 yards). They'll be pushed by incoming transfer Justin Popovich (Lock Haven University), and fellow returners Charlie Coenen, Ke'Lyn Washom and Bricen Brantley.

"Eric Richardson has stepped forward through the spring and through the summer," Sawvel said. "Jackson Holman has had a good spring and a good summer. Charlie Coenen, getting him back from his injury and offseason surgery, that'll be big. Deion DeBlanc, this will be a big fall camp for him.

"... When you put all that (together), there's talent. The big X

factor to it is, (transfer quarterback) Tyler Hughes will make life easier on some of those guys. Let's just be honest, there's going to be some things defensively you can't do when Tyler Hughes is running around on the field. If it's third-and-5, your way of playing us last year and your way of playing us this year will be way different.

"If you blow a rushing lane and you have a bunch of guys with their backs turned, Tyler Hughes can score from anywhere on the field. That changes everything."

The Cowboys are searching for their first 1,000-yard receiver since Tanner Gentry in 2016 (1,326). The last UW wide receiver to eclipse 500 yards in a season was Isaiah



DJ JOHNSON/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming wide receiver Jackson Holman, left, fights for positioning before a catch against Akron on Thursday, Aug. 28, 2025, in Akron, Ohio.



**HOLMAN:**

13 CATCHES, 139 YARDS, 10.7  
AVERAGE

**RICHARDSON:**

10 CATCHES, 112 YARDS, 11.2  
AVERAGE, 1 TOUCHDOWN

**COENEN:**

5 CATCHES, 99 YARDS, 19.8  
AVERAGE, 1 TOUCHDOWN

**DEBLANC:**

17 CATCHES, 90 YARDS, 5.3 AVERAGE

**BRANTLEY:**

5 CATCHES, 33 YARDS, 6.6 AVERAGE

|                  |      |      |     |
|------------------|------|------|-----|
| ERIC RICHARDSON  | SR.  | 5-11 | 189 |
| JACKSON HOLMAN   | JR.  | 6-3  | 205 |
| DEION DEBLANC    | SO.  | 5-10 | 191 |
| KE'LYN WASHOM    | RFR. | 6-1  | 204 |
| BRICEN BRANTLEY  | JR.  | 6-3  | 177 |
| PIERRE JACKSON   | RFR. | 5-11 | 170 |
| JOAQUIN SANDOVAL | SO.  | 5-10 | 187 |
| CHARLIE COENEN   | SR.  | 6-0  | 194 |
| TYLER NYSTROM    | SO.  | 6-2  | 195 |

|                                         |      |      |     |
|-----------------------------------------|------|------|-----|
| JUSTIN POPOVICH<br>[LOCK HAVEN]         | SR.  | 6-3  | 209 |
| JAYDEN WILLIAMS<br>[LAS VEGAS]          | FR., | 5-8  | 167 |
| JARELL GARY<br>[ROUND ROCK, TEXAS]      | FR.  | 5-11 | 195 |
| JORDAN STYLES<br>[THE WOODLANDS, TEXAS] | FR.  | 6-0  | 200 |



WYOMING TRIBUNE EAGLE FILE

University of Wyoming wide receiver Charlie Coenen runs in for a touchdown during a game against San Jose State on Saturday, Oct. 11, 2025, at War Memorial Stadium.

Neyor in 2021 (878).

Sawvel needs to see who will rise to the occasion during fall camp before he determines a depth chart.

"Eric Richardson had a good spring and played some for us last year. You're counting on him to step forward and have a really good season," Sawvel said. "Jackson Holman does good things, and he

had a solid spring. He carried that forward into a great summer. Justin Popovich, we count on him to do a number of things for us in the program. The wildcards beyond that are the guys that have a lot of talent that you have to see.

"Charlie Coenen had a tremendous summer after missing the spring with a shoulder injury. We know that Charlie will be where

he's supposed to be, he's going to fight his ass off, he catches the ball very well, and he runs well. We have to get big growth out of Deion DeBlanc, we have to get big growth from PJ Jackson, and we have to get big growth out of Ke'Lyn Washom.

"... I'm optimistic about the group, but we have to find that pecking order of people that you're going to say, 'We are going to count on these guys in a game to be able to effectively help us.' ... We need some guys to step forward, and I'm confident based on what I've seen."

Taylor plans to relieve some of the stress on the wide receivers

by utilizing multiple tight ends and running backs in certain formations. He believes that's the key to forcing opposing defenses into having to stretch the entire field. That strategy could open up passing lanes for the Cowboys' wide receivers.

"Everyone in the country wants that X receiver that's 6-foot-4, 210 pounds and runs a (4.4-second 40-yard dash). There's a lot of NFL teams that want that player, too," Taylor said. "If we can find 5-6 guys that will do the right thing every play with full speed and be a tough ass and kick someone's butt, the ball will find him."



# DEPTH THE KEY ON COWBOYS' DEFENSIVE LINE

By ALEX TAYLOR | WyoSports

A slight influx of money allowed Wyoming to be a little more aggressive during this year's transfer portal window.

Defensive line was one of the



positions that benefitted most.

The Cowboys added a trio of standout FCS transfers on the edge, including Jack Dunkley (Duquesne), Thaddeus Gianaris (Dartmouth) and Donnie Wingate (Southern Illinois).

The transfers will complement a returning group that includes Esaia Bogar, Kevin Sjogren, Jordan Turnbull and Cade Brook.

"My expectation is that this is clearly our best defense since I've been here in 2020. That's my expectation," third-year head coach Jay Sawvel said. "We have to do a lot of things to prove it. Part of the reason I feel like that's a strong possibility is the fact that we are stronger and bigger up front than we've ever been.

"We've never lined up with 250- and 255-pound defensive ends that can move and can do different things. Between (Wingate, Dunkley, Gianaris, Sjogren, Bogar and Brook), that's a pretty good group right there, and it's thick bodies that have some punch to them."

A deep room of defensive tackles will be sandwiched between the edge rushers.

That depth will be crucial after injuries derailed the position last fall.

Returners Jayden Williams, Dante Drake and Caleb Robinson highlight the room. Robinson and Drake return from season-ending Achilles tears last season.

"The standard is dominance," said Robinson, who's going into his sixth year at UW. "That's the name of the

**University of Wyoming defensive tackle Jayden Williams is back for another run on the Cowboys' defense.**

game. I want my guys to be as well-trained and as well-vetted as they can possibly be before the season. That's why I've been pushing guys like (Tanielu Maafala-Barbasa) and (Ja'Quan Redfern), who are some of the guys that just got to the team.

"(I want them to) understand what the standard is and that they have to live up to that standard, because it's real cutthroat at our position. You have to be a hard-ass at that position, too."

Williams started three games last season, tallying 24 tackles and three tackles for loss. Sawvel is counting on him making a significant jump as a junior.

"Jayden is ready to take the big step," Sawvel said. "He has an immense amount of talent, he runs very well, he's 295 pounds. Obviously when you see him, he's physically imposing. He's posed to take the next step. He got better as the season went on last year, he had a very good spring and he's had a very good summer.

"The expectation now is that he can translate that into becoming a potentially dominant player. He's the best athlete that we've had at that position since I've been at Wyoming."

Third-year defensive coordinator Aaron Bohl sees a few positions where depth could potentially be an issue later on down the road. Defensive line isn't one of them.

"I'm really excited about the group," Bohl said. "There is no replacement for size. When you get short at defensive tackle, you can do as much as you want, but it's hard to replace a guy that's 300 pounds. The thing that's really exciting is, while we don't have a lot of proven success from the year



**University of Wyoming defensive tackle Dante Drake returns after missing all of last year with an injury.**

before with some of these guys, we have a lot of guys that have talent. You'll find a couple guys out there that can do it all the time. That keeps the competitive level up. Guess what? All those guys, if you're not on your A game, you're

• CONTINUED ON PAGE 24





TROY BABBITT/UW ATHLETICS

University of Wyoming defensive end Esaia Bogar (11) plays against the Northern Iowa Panthers on Saturday, Sept. 6, 2025, at War Memorial Stadium.

University of Wyoming defensive tackle Jayden Williams celebrates during a game against Utah on Sept 13, 2025, at War Memorial Stadium.

TROY BABBITT/UW ATHLETICS



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

From left, University of Wyoming defensive ends Donnie Wingate, Jack Dunkley and Thaddeus Gianaris listen to defensive ends coach Brian Hendricks during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

University of Wyoming defensive tackle Tegen Seeds lines up for a drill during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.



2025 STATISTICS

WILLIAMS:

24 TACKLES, 3 TFLS

BOGAR:

13 TACKLES, 1.5 TFLS, 1 SACK

SJOGREN:

4 TACKLES, 1 TFL

BROOK:

2 TACKLES

CRAWFORD:

2 TACKLES

SEEDS: 1 TACKLE, 1 INTERCEPTION

DUNKLEY:

34 TACKLES, 9.5 TFLS, 3 SACKS, 1 FORCED FUMBLE

GIANARIS:

44 TACKLES, 9 TFLS, 5 SACKS

WINGATE:

37 TACKLES, 6 TFLS, 4 SACKS

REDFERN:

10 TACKLES, 1 TFL, 1 SACK, 1 FORCED FUMBLE

RETURNING PLAYERS

|                 |    |      |     |     |
|-----------------|----|------|-----|-----|
| ESAIA BOGAR     | DE | SR.  | 6-2 | 253 |
| ELTOUM MURGUS   | DE | SO.  | 6-3 | 223 |
| JASON HANDY     | DE | RFR. | 6-4 | 240 |
| KEVIN SJOGREN   | DE | JR.  | 6-5 | 251 |
| JORDAN TURNBULL | DE | JR.  | 6-5 | 254 |
| CADE BROOK      | DE | RFR. | 6-3 | 254 |
| TEGEN SEEDS     | DL | SO.  | 6-0 | 303 |
| ALEX HASWELL    | DL | SO.  | 6-5 | 294 |
| CODY CRAWFORD   | DT | JR.  | 6-1 | 295 |
| DANTE DRAKE     | DT | JR.  | 6-3 | 301 |
| CALEB ROBINSON  | DT | GR.  | 6-2 | 306 |
| HENRY REHBERG   | DT | RFR. | 6-3 | 283 |
| JAYDEN WILLIAMS | DT | JR.  | 6-3 | 296 |

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING NEWCOMERS

|                                                     |    |     |     |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----|-----|-----|-----|
| JACK DUNKLEY<br>(DUQUESNE)                          | GR | SR. | 6-4 | 250 |
| THADDEUS GIANARIS<br>(DARTMOUTH)                    | DT | GR. | 6-3 | 305 |
| BECK HASWELL<br>(SHERIDAN)                          | DE | SR. | 6-5 | 260 |
| DONNIE WINGATE<br>(SOUTHERN ILLINOIS)               | DE | JR. | 6-2 | 240 |
| JA’QUAN REDFERN<br>(MURRAY STATE)                   | DE | JR. | 6-2 | 238 |
| TANIELU<br>MAAFALA-BARBASA<br>(LAS VEGAS)           | DE | FR. | 6-2 | 220 |
| MACGREGOR BYERS<br>(HOUSTON)                        | DE | FR. | 6-4 | 220 |
| XAVIER JACKSON<br>(O’FALLON, MISSOURI)              | DE | FR. | 6-3 | 230 |
| MOHANAD NAHHAS<br>(HUDSON VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE) | DT | FR. | 6-2 | 255 |

going to get passed.”

Sheridan’s Alex Haswell and Douglas’ Tegen Seeds could find themselves in the rotation with a strong fall camp. Natrona County’s Cody Crawford is out for the season with a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

Seeds saw action at the end of last season in response to the slew of injuries at defensive tackle. He intercepted a pass from San Diego State quarterback Jayden Denegal in November.

“Tegen Seeds had a great summer,” Sawvel said. “Tegen went from being like, ‘OK, he could maybe plug in,’ to ... Tegen is a legitimate player. He’s made himself into that.”





# STUHLSATZ, RUTHERFORD

## leading the charge for Wyoming's LBs

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming linebackers Gary Rutherford, left, and Ethan Stuhlsatz are set to take over in the heart of the Cowboys' defense.

By **ALEX TAYLOR**  
WyoSports

**T**he University of Wyoming's dominance at the linebacker position continued last fall.

Evan Eller and Brayden Johnson won starting jobs during training camp before leading the team with a combined 156 tackles. The pair

added 14½ tackles for loss, three sacks, three interceptions and two forced fumbles.

Both exhausted their eligibility after the season, but third-year head coach Jay Sawvel believes there's a small chance Johnson could return for another year following an injunction issued by

U.S. District Court of Colorado Judge Charlotte Sweeney against the NCAA allowing all class of 2022 athletes a fifth season of eligibility.

That injunction — if it holds up in court — would allow Johnson and cornerback Dainsus Miller the opportunity to return for another season at UW.

"I've texted with Brayden, and we'll see where that's at. I've talked to Dainsus, and I know Dainsus for sure would come back," Sawvel said on Aug. 5. "... I don't know what's about to happen. ... I have no clue."

Regardless of the court ruling,

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 26**



RETURNING PLAYERS

|                 |      |     |     |
|-----------------|------|-----|-----|
| GARY RUTHERFORD | SO.  | 6-1 | 234 |
| PARKER MOORE    | RFR. | 6-2 | 240 |
| STEVEN PEREZ    | RFR. | 6-1 | 230 |
| ETHAN STUHLSATZ | GR.  | 6-4 | 239 |
| DASH BAUMAN     | SO.  | 6-3 | 234 |

Ethan Stuhlsatz will slide into the starting spot at mike linebacker. The preseason All-Mountain West selection bounced back from a slow start by tallying 41 tackles, 1½ tackles for loss and a pass breakup last season.

“I know (Logan Wilson) well, and he’s great to the program, but I didn’t get a chance to coach him,” Sawvel said. “From the time that we’ve gone forward from there, Ethan is the best athlete that we’ve

had at linebacker at Wyoming. He’s 6-foot-4, he can run, he can jump, he’s 240 pounds, and he’s got the keys to the prime position in our defense right now. We expect a really big year out of Ethan Stuhlsatz.”

Gary Rutherford is the favorite to join Stuhlsatz in the starting lineup. He’s been practicing on the weak side after contributing 15 tackles and one tackle for loss last fall.

“Gary Rutherford will put himself

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING NEWCOMERS

|                                 |     |     |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| KARSON BUTTS, SO                | SO. | 6-2 | 236 |
| [GARDEN CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE] |     |     |     |
| BOSTON GABLE                    | FR. | 6-0 | 190 |
| [GERING, NEBRASKA]              |     |     |     |
| DANTE BRULEY                    | FR. | 6-1 | 220 |
| [CHANDLER, ARIZONA]             |     |     |     |
| MASON WRIGHT                    | FR. | 6-3 | 224 |
| [PARKVILLE, MISSOURI]           |     |     |     |

in a position to (play),” Sawvel said. “This is Gary’s time. Gary needs to take this and run. He had a tremendous summer. He’s got leadership capability.

“... Steven Perez and Parker Moore, they’ve got the ability to be good players. They’re physical and have a lot of talent, but they haven’t played. Now, what happens when it’s time to go play? We’ll see. That’s

a big piece. The depth there can be solid, but some of it’s unproven.”

Sawvel and defensive coordinator Aaron Bohl aim for at least five starting-caliber linebackers each season. Perez, Moore, Dash Bauman and Karson Butts are the favorite candidates to push for playing time behind Stuhlsatz and Rutherford.



TROY BABBIT/UW ATHLETICS

University of Wyoming linebacker Gary Rutherford, back, makes a tackle during a game against Colorado on Sept. 20, 2025, in Boulder, Colo.



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“What was good about last year’s group was, every game besides one, we played five guys,” Bohl said. “Maybe it would have been one play or five plays or whatever, but guys proved they should be on the field, and it was a really good group. That kept them all going forward and kept guys fresh. We have to get back to that at some point.

“We have a lot of guys with some talent that can play, but they’re young, and that’s the way a lot of people are in this age of college football. (Rutherford) has to step into a different role now. He’s doing a good job so far, but we have to (keep getting better through fall camp). Dash has a certain skill set that can really help us, Parker Moore and Steven Perez do, too. Karson Butts is doing some good things.”

Stuhlsatz learned plenty during his first season at UW last fall. The Lindenwood University transfer was beat out in fall camp before ending the year as one of the Cowboys’

biggest defensive contributors.

Those learning experiences prepared him for the role he’s in now.

“(Leadership) is a big step, because one of the things that maybe hurt Ethan Stuhlsatz early last year was the, ‘Take charge of the group,’ part,” Sawvel said. “You have to get a lot of people lined up as the mike linebacker for us defensively.

“Playmaking-wise, that’s there for him. He’s good at that part of it. It was the other part that he needed to really develop and focus on, and he got better at the last part of the season last year. That is why he started playing more and more.

“Now that he’s taken that on in the offseason, along with the fact that he’s had a very elite development period since he’s been here as far as physical numbers and those types of things, he’s the best athlete we’ve had at linebacker since I’ve been here, and so we’re excited about that.”

2025

STATISTICS

## **STUHLSATZ:**

**41 TACKLES, 1.5 TFLS, 1 PASS BREAKUP**

## **RUTHERFORD:**

**15 TACKLES, 1 TFL**

## **BAUMAN:**

**2 TACKLES**

## **PEREZ:**

**1 TACKLE**

## **BUTTS:**

**66 TACKLES, 5.5 TFLS, 1 SACK, 1 INT, 1 FUMBLE RECOVERY**

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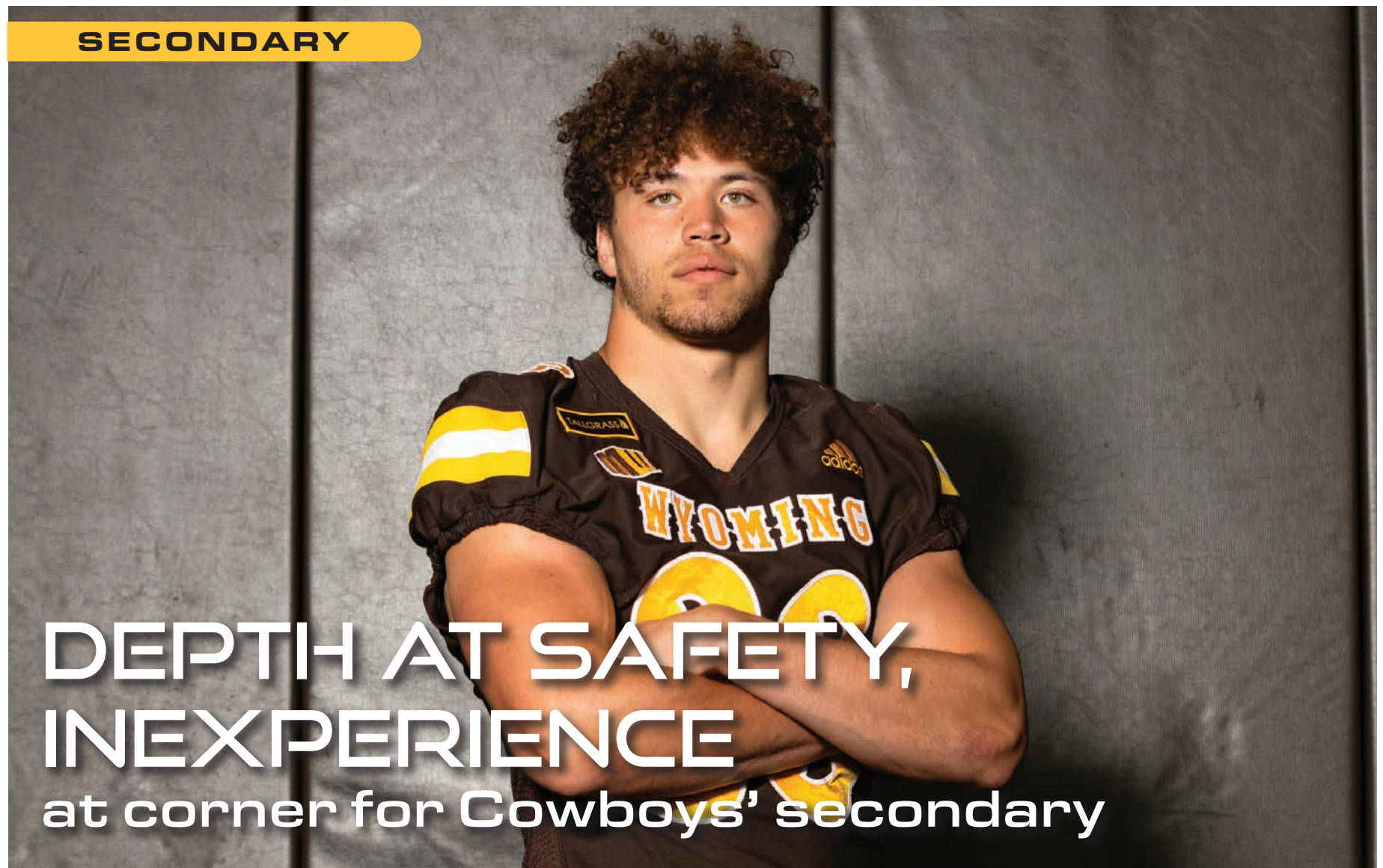
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# DEPTH AT SAFETY, INEXPERIENCE at corner for Cowboys' secondary

LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming safety Jones Thomas is looking to take the next step going into his junior season.

By **ALEX TAYLOR**

WyoSports

**T**here's one requirement if you want to play cornerback in Jay Sawvel's program.

The third-year University of Wyoming head coach has specialized in coaching defensive backs for three decades. He knows what to look for when it comes to developing talent in the secondary.

"A good defensive back, No. 1, does not give up big plays. The second thing is, he makes plays," Sawvel said. "I had a guy when I was at Ferris State a long time ago. He had three interceptions in the game, but he gave up two touchdowns over 50 yards. I demoted him the next week.

"I don't give a (expletive) if you're the conference player of the week, that was some (expletive) what you did. Just because there was one tipped ball that landed right in his lap and the quarterback screwed up and threw a ball to you in cover two, it was like, 'Well, what'd you do?' You want to have that consistency with those guys as far as how they're starting the play, footwork, fundamentals and where their eyes are."

Cornerback was arguably the most important position battle as the Cowboys made their way through training camp. They lost Tyrese Boss (Arizona) and Markie Grant (Utah State) in the transfer portal.

It wasn't the first time UW developed young talent at corner just for them to leave, and it certainly won't be the last.

"There's talent at this position. A lot of it. We've got to do a lot of coaching on it," Sawvel said. "... A lot of guys at that position, they may have talent, but they don't have the diligence and coachability and the focus to do what they're supposed to do on a play-in, play-out basis.

"Until people go out there and watch a guy play corner and coach a guy at corner, you don't realize that's a hard position. It's a really hard position. Not as much with assignments, but it's all technique. ... He has to understand concepts and how it applies across a variety

of different alignments that an offense can do."

Dainsus Miller was granted another year of eligibility midway through fall camp. He played in 11 games for the Cowboys last fall after transferring from Mercer. Miller tallied 27 tackles, five pass breakups and a forced fumble.

The Cowboys' defense – which ranked No. 30 nationally at 20.5 points allowed last fall – returns just two starters, and both are in the secondary. Safety Jones Thomas and nickelback Desman Hearn will likely return to the starting lineup following fall camp.

UW graduated Andrew Johnson,

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 30**



RETURNING PLAYERS

|                      |       |      |      |     |
|----------------------|-------|------|------|-----|
| DESMAN HEARNS        | S     | SR.  | 6-0  | 193 |
| BROOKLYN CHEEK       | S,    | SO.  | 6-1  | 204 |
| KAIDEN KIMBLE-TURNER | S     | RFR. | 5-10 | 202 |
| ELVIN AMPOFO         | S     | RFR. | 6-0  | 182 |
| LAFAI PURCELL        | S     | JR.  | 5-11 | 185 |
| JADEN DACOSTA        | S     | JR.  | 6-0  | 203 |
| JONES THOMAS         | S     | JR.  | 6-2  | 202 |
| IAN BELL             | CB    | JR.  | 6-1  | 193 |
| BJ INMON             | CB    | JR.  | 5-11 | 191 |
| TYSON SHAMSID-DEEN   | CB/WR | SO.  | 5-10 | 180 |
| DAVID LEONARD        | DB    | SO.  | 5-11 | 190 |
| DREW JACKSON         | DB    | SO.  | 5-11 | 185 |

2025 STATISTICS

THOMAS:

30 7 TACKLES, 1.5 TFLS, 2 INTS, 4 PASS BREAKUPS

HEARNS:

35 TACKLES, 2 TFLS, 2 INTS, 5 PASS BREAKUPS, 2 FORCED FUMBLES

CHEEK:

8 TACKLES

SHAMSID-DEEN:

7 TACKLES, 1 PASS BREAKUP

BELL:

4 TACKLES

DACOSTA:

3 TACKLES, 1 QB HIT

LEONARD:

2 TACKLES

FRANKLIN:

28 TACKLES, 1 FORCED FUMBLE, 4 PASS DEFLECTIONS (JACKSONVILLE STATE)

VINCENT:

9 TACKLES (COLORADO STATE)

BROWNLEE:

49 TACKLES, 3.5 TFLS, 6 PASS BREAKUPS (MISSOURI SOUTHERN STATE)

WATSON:

2 TACKLES (COLORADO)

MCGRAW:

63 TACKLES, 2 INTS, 9 PASS BREAKUPS (WEST LIBERTY)

MACKEY:

16 TACKLES, 5.5 TFLS 8 PASS BREAKUPS, 1 FORCED FUMBLE (WEBER STATE)

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING NEWCOMERS

|                                                 |         |      |     |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------|------|-----|
| TRAVIS FRANKLIN<br>(JACKSONVILLE STATE)         | CB, SR. | 5-10 | 180 |
| JETT VINCENT<br>(COLORADO STATE)                | S, JR.  | 6-0  | 194 |
| DA'MARION BROWNLEE<br>(MISSOURI SOUTHERN STATE) | S, SO.  | 6-0  | 202 |
| NATHANIAL WATSON<br>(COLORADO)                  | CB, SO. | 5-11 | 182 |
| THERMAN WILLIAMS<br>(RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA)     | S, SO.  | 6-0  | 200 |
| JUNUS MCGRAW<br>(WEST LIBERTY)                  | S, RFR. | 6-1  | 199 |
| LOGAN MACKEY<br>(WEBER STATE)                   | S, FR.  | 6-0  | 155 |
| KENDALL GRIFFIN<br>(CHICAGO)                    | CB, FR. | 5-10 | 170 |





DJ JOHNSON/FOR WYOSPORTS

**University of Wyoming nickelback Desman Hearn, left, and safety Jones Thomas make a tackle during a game against San Diego State on Saturday, Nov. 1, 2025, in San Diego.**

who started at the other safety spot. Losing the Cheyenne native could have a lasting impact, according to defensive coordinator Aaron Bohl.

“Andrew did such a great job communicating to everyone on the back-end last year. So while you only lose one piece, he affected all the pieces so well,” Bohl said.

Candidates to replace Johnson at safety include returners Brooklyn Cheek, Jaden DaCosta and Kaiden Kimble-Turner, and incoming transfers Jett Vincent (Colorado State) and Travis Franklin (Jacksonville State).

Cheek seemed to be the favorite following a strong spring camp.

“He has a level of confidence that he didn’t have a year ago,” Sawvel said. “... He’s gotten much stronger. He’s bigger right now than he was a year ago, and all that’s translated to added confidence. There’s a really

good ceiling that he can reach, but we’re not there yet. We still have a lot of work to do, but I like the trajectory that he’s on right now.”

Sawvel and Bohl are still haunted by the 2024 season, which was their first in their respective roles. Injuries in the secondary, specifically at safety, crushed the Cowboys.

That’s led them to never leave the cupboard bare again.

“I feel better, honestly, at every spot on defense, depth wise,” Bohl said. “(2024) was a rough year for everyone, obviously. I remember sitting there and looking like, ‘We failed in the offseason,’ because we didn’t have a deep enough group. At the end of the day, people are going to get hurt. It’s football.

“You have to make sure that there’s always a next-guy-up mentality that can build a group that channels that to push each other.”



UW ATHLETICS/COURTESY

**University of Wyoming cornerback Tyson Shamsid-Deen guards wide receiver Jackson Holman during a practice at War Memorial Stadium.**



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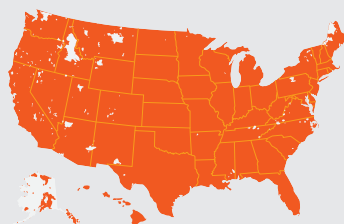
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# Sawvel wants bounce-back year on SPECIAL TEAMS

WYOMING TRIBUNE EAGLE FILE

University of Wyoming kicker Erik Sandvik, left, and punter Bart Edmiston are back as the Cowboys' specialists.

By ALEX TAYLOR  
WyoSports

**S**pecial teams wasn't up to par for the University of Wyoming last fall.

That was exemplified against UNLV when the Cowboys had two punts blocked and returned for touchdowns. The Rebels earned a 14-point win.

Third-year head Cowboys coach Jay Sawvel put much of the blame on former long snapper Carson York, but punter Bart Edmiston Jr. was also partially responsible. Edmiston returns as a preseason All-Mountain West selection, and will be joined in the operation by long snapper Nathan Curry, a North Alabama transfer.

"I like the way (Curry) has operated," Sawvel said. "Punt snapping, he's been pretty solid. Bart Edmiston's a good punter. Bart

Edmiston's a really good punter when the ball gets him in the strike zone, but Bart is also not a 6-foot-3 punter. So, if you get the ball outside the frame, sometimes Bart has a tendency to leave his feet to catch the ball. When you do that, tick, tick, tick. That's what happened on one of the kicks against UNLV last year. The ball was (high) and he overreacted and left his feet. Well, guess what? You have to come down before you can kick it.

"... There's a clock. It's no different than a quarterback. You can't stand back here for five seconds and squeeze the air out of the ball, you eventually have to kick the thing. So, it's an important position. Those are the things that nobody thinks about."

Edmiston was one of the top punters in the MW last fall. The senior was fourth in the conference

and No. 12 in the nation at 46.1 yards per punt. He punted 65 times for nearly 3,000 yards, logged a long of 68 yards and recorded 26 punts of 50 or more yards. Twenty-two punts landed inside the 20-yard line.

The field-goal unit from last year didn't put up any earth-shattering numbers, but that was mostly due to a stagnant offense.

Erik Sandvik went 6-of-11 (54.6%) with a long of 41 during his first season as the starter. He was 0-of-2 from beyond 50 yards and 24-of-24 on extra points. Cheyenne South graduate Keelan Anderson went 0-of-1 on the year after missing a 54-yard attempt.

"(Sandvik has) improved," Sawvel said. "There were strides that he made in the spring. ... There's a confidence level there. I don't want to kick a field goal, though. If we

can get to the space I want to get to offensively, we're going to go for a lot more (fourth-down conversions) than what anybody's seen around here in a long time. But we have to get to that space.

"... We'll put some heat on him (during training camp), but there's been really good progress. He has a level of confidence he didn't have a year ago."

Sophomore wide receiver Deion DeBlanc took the majority of punt returns during training camp. He returned nine punts for 151 yards (16.8 average), which included a 73-yard touchdown against San Jose State. Fellow wide receiver Charlie Coenen returned 10 punts for 71 yards (7.1 average) after DeBlanc struggled with ball security.



**NATHAN CURRY** LS SR. 6-0, 196  
[NORTH ALABAMA]

## RETURNING

## PLAYERS

**CHARLIE HOUSTON** LS, RFR. 5-10 212

**BART EDMISTON** P, SR. 6-0 205

**GAVYN HELM** P, SO. 6-3 208

**ERIK SANDVIK** PK, JR. 6-1 200

**KEELAN ANDERSON** PK, SO. 5-10 166

**KICKOFF RETURNS:**

DEION DEBLANC: 6 returns, 109 yards, 18.2 average

BRICEN BRANTLEY: 4 returns, 73 yards, 18.3 average

**PUNT RETURNS:**

DEBLANC: 9 returns, 151 yards, 16.8 average, 1 TD

CHARLIE COENEN: 10 returns, 71 yards, 7.1 average

**KICKING:**

ERIK SANDVIK: 6-11 (54.55%)

KEELAN ANDERSON: 0-1 (0%)

**KICKOFFS:**

EDMISTON: 62.4 yard average, 14 touchbacks

SANDVIK: 60.2 average, 1 touchback

ANDERSON: 65 average, 2 touchbacks

**PUNTS:**

EDMISTON: 46.11 average, 22 inside of 20, long of 68



DJ JOHNSON/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming's Bart Edmiston sends off a punt during a game against Akron on Thursday, Aug. 28, 2025, in Akron, Ohio.



LEO BEACH/FOR WYOSPORTS

University of Wyoming's Erik Sandvik is going into his second season as the Cowboys' starting kicker.





# MEET UW'S



## COLORADO STATE

[2-10 OVERALL,  
1-7 MW]

**New Era:** The Rams will have a different logo on their jerseys when they host the Border War on Sept. 5. Colorado State is off to the Pac-12, joining Boise State, Fresno State, San Diego State and Utah State as the group transitions out of the Mountain West. A new league affiliation isn't the only change in Fort Collins. After firing Jay Norvell midway through last season, the Rams replaced him with Jim Mora, who is coming off consecutive 9-4 seasons at Connecticut. He takes over a CSU program that finished last in the MW at 2-10.

"Good days are ahead," Mora said during his introductory news conference. "We're going to work every single day and work as hard as we can to be the very best we can be on that day, and then we're going to wake up the next day and do it again. We're not going to put any limitations on what we can be. Our goals will be set at a very high level, and we'll work every day to attain those goals."

**Complete overhaul:** The Rams' two-win season led to change around the board this offseason. CSU returns just four starters, with one on offense, and three on defense. The Rams also have a pair of new coordinators, as Pryce Tracy came with Mora from UConn. He served as the Huskies' passing game coordinator and quarterbacks coach and is now CSU's offensive coordinator. While Mora retained CSU defensive coordinator Tyson Summers (who served as the Rams' interim head coach after Norvell was fired), Mora made Summers a co-defensive coordinator alongside Kenny McClendon. The latter also comes from UConn. CSU will have a quarterback battle in fall camp, with Oklahoma State transfer Hauss Hejny set to battle UConn transfer K'saan Farrar.

**Border War changes:** One of the most historic college football rivalries will no longer count as a conference game. Following the Rams' move to the Pac-12, CSU and Wyoming signed a contract to continue the series through 2036. The new nonconference scheduling agreement starts this fall when the Rams host the Cowboys on Sept. 5 in Fort Collins, Colorado. The matchup serves as both program's season opener.

"That's a great thing in the fact that our players can look at game one as a game that is circled by everyone in the state of Wyoming," Wyoming coach Jay Sawvel said at MW media days. "That is a big deal for us, and it's a big deal in this program. Now the thing we have to do is we have to make sure that that one game doesn't define (our season). You can win it, but we have a game the next week. A big piece of it is going to be managing that balance, but make no mistake about it, we know (the importance of this game). When you coach at Wyoming and you play at Wyoming, you know how big of a deal this game is and how big of a deal this rivalry is and what the (Bronze Boot) means to the people of the state. We have an obligation to live up to our end of that."

## N. COLORADO



[4-8 OVERALL,  
2-6 BIG SKY]

**State of the program:** Ed Lamb is going into his fourth season as Northern Colorado's head coach. The former Brigham Young assistant has a career record of 5-30 following last year's 4-8 campaign. One of those losses came in controversial fashion, as the Bears scored what would have been a game-winning touchdown with eight seconds remaining against Colorado State. The officials used video review to overturn the call. UNC was picked 10th out of 13 teams in the Big Sky preseason coaches poll, and 11th in the media poll. The Bears haven't had a winning season since 2011. Four of UNC's eight losses last fall were by one score or less.

"Guys this age, they need to see that they can compete with anybody," Lamb told Denver 7 in May. "They saw that and realized that, but still came up short. They realized that we were a couple of plays away in several games from being a winning team or a playoff team. That was left on the field, which is disappointing for last year, but encouraging for this year."

**Recruiting philosophy:** The Bears enter the season with 64 players from Colorado. That's been a deliberate choice for Lamb as a way to develop talent from UNC's backyard. While retaining talent is a different story, keeping local standouts in state will remain a priority for the Bears as long as Lamb is in Greeley.

"(Recruiting locally) is the best avenue available for us," Lamb told Denver 7. "There's a lot of teams, even in our league, that are relying on portal recruiting, but that costs money. Those transfer kids have a price tag. That, combined with the fact that Colorado has historically been under-recruited at the high school level – it's even more under-recruited now. So, I see excellent development potential in the Colorado high school kids, and now we're building a regional cohesiveness that I can feel. I know our players can feel it, too."

**Standout talent:** The Bears have three Big Sky preseason all-conference players, including defensive lineman Ezra Ekuban, offensive lineman Jack Ziebell and long snapper Maddox Broughton. Ekuban tallied 37 tackles, eight tackles for loss and 2½ sacks a year ago, while Ziebell was an All-Big Sky honorable mention. Going into year four, Lamb believes now is the time for the Bears to harvest the fruits of their labor after going winless in his first season.

"Things felt pretty recreational with a lot of the guys in my first couple of years here," Lamb told Denver 7. "We did a lot of preaching. A lot of preaching about lifestyle and commitment, but those guys from our first couple of recruiting classes are now seniors and juniors. I can feel a big difference in their commitment. ... UNC can be successful. We can win a Big Sky championship. We can be a nationally-relevant football team, but we do have to overcome some obstacles that other schools in our conference don't have."

## CENTRAL MICHIGAN



[7-6 OVERALL,  
5-3 MAC]

**Mirroring philosophies:** The Chippewas finished 60th in the country in rushing (163.5 yards per game) last fall, which proved to be one dimensional. Their passing attack was 116th at 167.1 yards. CMU returns quarterback Angel Flores, who fluctuated in and out of the lineup a year ago before suffering an injury. He was still the team's second-leading rusher with 527 yards and a team-high eight touchdowns. While second-year coach Matt Drinkall expects to pound the rock, he wants to prove an ability to throw, too.

"We were incredibly conservative in all three phases (last season), and now we'll be able to blossom out and expand here a little bit and play a little more exciting football," Drinkall said at MAC media days. "... We have to play very high-quality football, but the biggest thing is we have to make up differences in the margins. Areas of the game where maybe other people don't quite pay as much attention to, that's the stuff we have to obsess over and win those things consistently."

**Back on track:** The Chippewas made their 14th bowl game in school history in Drinkall's first season, which was their first postseason appearance since 2021. The wide receiver tandem of Langston Lewis and Tommy McIntosh were a big reason after combining for 74 catches, 1,018 yards and six touchdowns, and both are back at CMU. The Chippewas return 10 starters and were picked fifth in the MAC preseason poll.

"We've replaced over half the team from last year. The problems that are new in college football are not unique to Central Michigan," Drinkall said. "Everybody's got the same issues. Our staff has done a great job of recruiting great players who are a great fit for us. ... Even though we've got a lot of new guys, we have a very good assimilation process and system in place and strong internal leadership and culture. It's one of those things that, once it gets up and going, you keep seeing dividends from it over and over."

**Defensive turnover:** The Chippewas lost their top seven tacklers from a year ago, as they return just three defensive starters. CMU ranked 55th in the country in scoring defense at 22.5 points allowed, and it was tied for 36th with a plus-five turnover margin. The Cowboys will see a familiar face in safety Justin Taylor, who transferred to CMU after spending one season in Laramie.

"Everybody keeps telling us how good last year was, but that's over with and done with," Drinkall told ESPN at MAC media day. "Now it's a whole new team starting from scratch, and really we have a whole new standard and expectation that we want to get to. We're excited to attack it. ... Our defense is what I'm most excited about because that's probably the most unknown (aspect) of the program right now. When we got hired, they were 13th out of 13 (MAC teams) in defense.... We lost some really productive players ... but we have this really cool mix of young, talented guys that it's their time now, and then some transfers that we brought in."



# FOES



## HAWAII



[9-4 OVERALL,  
5-3 MW]

**Back in the mix:** Timmy Chang's seat got a little more comfortable following last year's 9-4 campaign at Hawaii. It was Chang's first winning season at his alma mater, bringing his career record to 22-29 as a head coach. The Rainbow Warriors made their first postseason appearance since 2020 last fall, which was a 35-31 win over California in their home stadium at the Hawaii Bowl. Chang is looking to build off last year's success by claiming Hawaii's first Mountain West title since joining the league in 2012. The Warriors return six starters, including four on offense, and two on defense. Elijah Palmer, who's going into fourth season at Hawaii, believes his team should be in the conference championship conversation this fall.

"We've been through two (five-win seasons), and we've been through hard things. For us to get to 9-4 last year, that was kind of a breakthrough for us, and it came at a great time," the nickelback said at MW media days. "It came at a time when our team was ready. We felt like we were always ready, but God has a different plan for every team. We just felt like that was our breakthrough, and now we're mature enough to understand success and to be able to improve on it."

Another gunslinger: Sophomore Micah Alejado was one of the best quarterbacks in the country last fall, despite playing through a handful of lingering injuries. His 282.4 passing yards per game ranked eighth nationally, which earned him MW freshman of the year honors. The success also bled into the summer, as he was named this year's MW preseason player of the year. Chang expects a significant jump in leadership from Alejado this season.

"Playing the quarterback position in the biggest team game, you lead everybody, and he understands that," Chang said. "He's only as good as his offensive line and his defensive lines and his receivers and his running backs. (The big thing for him this year) is to lead by example, come to work every day and hold himself to the highest standard. That'll be reciprocated by his teammates. He wants to be that guy."

**Air it out:** Hawaii's passing attack led the conference last season. Wide receiver Pofele Ashlock played a big part, hauling in 76 catches for 827 yards and eight touchdowns to earn second team All-MW honors. He had four games with at least 100 receiving yards, and three games with multiple touchdowns. His return for a fourth season at Hawaii was music to his teammates' ears.

"Pofele works hard," Palmer said. "Anybody that works hard is going to reap the benefits of what they do, and he's one of those guys that's a competitor, as well. He doesn't like to lose. He never has and never will. He's a real laid-back dude off the field, but on the field he makes that switch when it's time to go. He's not afraid to get in your face, and he's not afraid to talk any trash. He's able to back it up."

## N. DAKOTA STATE



[12-1 OVERALL,  
8-0 MISSOURI  
VALLEY]

**Leveling up:** North Dakota State finally made the jump from the Football Championship Subdivision to the Football Bowl Subdivision by joining the Mountain West. The Bison are expected to compete for league championships right away after winning 10 FCS national titles since 2011. NDSU is also immediately eligible for bowl games after the NCAA eliminated the two-year transition window for schools moving up a level.

"It's been the right time (to move up) for a long time," offensive guard Griffin Empey said at MW media days. "... We've been working on this for the longest time, and we're ready to go fly around and have fun. ... Our confidence level is always going to be very, very high. We trust our process. ... We know that we'll be ready to go with whoever shows up on Saturdays."

"It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, we'll play whoever, whenever," defensive tackle Keenan Wilson added. "It could be in a sandbox or an ice storm, it doesn't matter. We're here for competition. That's what the Bison are. We're not shying away from competition."

**Polasek back in the MW:** Tim Polasek spent three seasons as Wyoming's offensive coordinator from 2021-23. He left Laramie to become NDSU's head coach, winning a national title in his first season. His Bison will clash with his former employer, as NDSU hosts UW on Oct. 3 in the Fargodome. The matchup will also serve as the Bison's homecoming.

"I maybe would rather not have to go up (to Fargo), but that's part of it," UW coach Jay Sawvel said. "No matter what, it's always going to be a challenge when you play them and you play a program that's had this level of success that they've had. ... Go back in time and look at the number of NFL players that they've had come out of their program. Compared to a lot of other Mountain West programs, they've got more. So, there's a challenge from that perspective there, too."

**Bohl Bowl?:** Craig Bohl left a legacy at NDSU before becoming Wyoming's head coach in 2013. He was the head coach when Polasek was at UW, and Sawvel served as the Cowboys' defensive coordinator during the same span. With Colorado State now out of the MW, are the Bison a new conference rival?

"It'd be a really cool rivalry," Empey said. "... People that live in Wyoming and North Dakota are more blue collar and tough. We live in these cold winters and we get all this snow. I think our fan bases would appreciate the rivalry with each other, and I think the teams would, too. We both strive to play a very similar brand of football with physicality, running the ball and having the defense flying around. It'd be a really cool thing to get going."

## SAN JOSE STATE



[3-9 OVERALL,  
2-6 MW]

**Staffing turnover:** Losing comes at a cost. San Jose State's 3-9 campaign last fall – which ended a three-year bowl game streak – led to coach Ken Niumatalolo firing several assistants, including defensive coordinator Derrick Odum, with two games left on the schedule. The Spartans finished 119th in the country in scoring defense at 32.5 points allowed. Niumatalolo, who is going into his 19th season as a head coach, has a career record of 119-98.

"I hate to lose," Niumatalolo said at MW media days. "I'm a competitor. Last season pisses me off. ... I go to sleep at night thinking about what I did wrong and how I can improve our team. Everything from December on has been about that. ... None of us were happy about last season, and we're excited about this year. ... I feel like I made some mistakes last year in the preparation leading up (to the season), and I wanted to make sure that we rectified that."

**Spread and shred:** After running a triple-option at Navy for 16 years, Niumatalolo switched to a spread-and-shred attack at SJSU. The Spartans were 13th nationally at 282.6 passing yards per game last fall, but that production didn't come without a cost. SJSU was tied for 131st in the country with a minus-13 turnover margin. The Spartans will have some new players in their system this time around after losing quarterback Walker Eget (Duke) and wide receiver Danny Scudero (Colorado) to the transfer portal. SJSU returns two offensive starters, both on the offensive line.

"We're going to continue to do what we do," Niumatalolo said. "... We have to take care of the ball. We were second-to-last in the country in turnovers. It's going to be hard to win any games doing that."

**Jobs up for grabs:** Fall camp will be a busy time for the Spartans. They return zero defensive starters after finishing last in the conference in points allowed. While new defensive coordinator Bojay Filimoeatu figures out the defense, Niumatalolo will be eyeing a position battle at quarterback. Hawaii transfer Luke Weaver is the favorite after throwing for 628 yards and six touchdowns last season. Whichever quarterback wins the job will look to continue SJSU's historic run at wide receiver. A Spartans wideout has led the country in receptions and receiving yards in back-to-back seasons (Nick Nash in 2024, Scudero in 2025).

"We want to see production (out of the wide receivers we bring in)," Niumatalolo said. "We're looking for guys who can run and can catch the football. ... We've been able to show in the last two years with the guys who have come through our program that you're going to put up some numbers here, and you're going to be productive. That's been the selling point for us. The proof is in the pudding."





# MEET UW'S

## NORTHERN ILLINOIS



[3-9 OVERALL,  
2-6 MAC]

**Late change:** Remember when Northern Illinois trotted into South Bend and beat then-No. 5-ranked Notre Dame in 2024? It's been tough sledding for the Huskies since. NIU finished 4-4 in the Mid-American Conference that year, and last season was even worse. The Huskies won just three games, with one being a two-point win over FCS opponent Holy Cross. To make matters worse, Thomas Hammock, who was NIU's head coach during the win over Notre Dame, quit in February to become the Seattle Seahawks running backs coach. He was replaced by his defensive coordinator, Rob Harley. The interim coach is confident about the direction of a program that's made 15 bowl games this century, including the 2013 Orange Bowl.

"We're not going to shy away from competition," Harley said at MW media days. "... What helps you a ton is just the foundation that's been set over many, many years at NIU. That is well beyond me, and the strong foundation of what this place is all about (is important). ... They can feel that tradition. They can feel what that winning history looks like and feels like. You're anchored in that."

**No more MAction:** Sports bettors love the lure of a mid-week football game on ESPN. Players and coaches, not so much. After joining the MW in July, the Huskies will no longer have to play a bulk of their meaningful conference games on Tuesday or Wednesday nights. Harley believes NIU's fans are the biggest beneficiaries of the conference realignment.

"Honestly, what's good for the fans, that does matter to us in this regard, because we want them to have a good experience," Harley said. "You want them to come and provide that environment. I think this will give us that. Now, will that be the end all, be all? No, we have to go put a great product on the field, but it's a great league, and it's been a great league. ... It's a logo that means something."

**Must-see TV:** Harley is plenty familiar with the history between NIU and Wyoming on the football field. While the programs have only met twice, both matchups were some of the most memorable games in recent memory. You might remember Josh Allen's walk-off touchdown against the Huskies in 2016 after a lengthy delay? What about when the Cowboys blew a 42-16 lead before eventually winning 50-43 in 2021? Harley expects similar outcomes now that NIU is in the MW.

"As I watch (Wyoming), they're very similar to where we kind of want to be," Harley said. "The toughness, and also how we do things is much more important than what we do. It'll be mirror images. It will be similar opponents going against each other and cracking heads. That's fun. You want those. You want to go against great opponents."

## AIR FORCE



[4-8 OVERALL,  
3-5 MW]

**The Szarka show:** Air Force has the second-most returning starters in the conference with 11, and junior quarterback Liam Szarka highlights that group. The Falcons' offense averaged a blistering 518 yards during the first four games he played the majority of snaps in as a sophomore. A late-season injury derailed Szarka's campaign, but he returns to Air Force after earning an All-MW honorable mention. Szarka led a Falcons offense that finished third in the country at 261.4 rushing yards per game. The quarterback was Air Force's leading rusher with 922 yards and 13 touchdowns.

"He understands better how to utilize the resources around him where he doesn't feel like he has to do everything," Air Force coach Troy Calhoun said at MW media days. "He embraces the heck out of any type of responsibility that's placed upon his shoulders."

**Back to the basics:** While the unit improved over the course of last season, Air Force's defense struggled early on. The Falcons ranked 126th nationally, leading Calhoun to make a change at defensive coordinator. Steve Russ returns to the Academy after spending last season at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. After spending six seasons in the NFL, Russ was the special assistant to the head coach for Air Force in 2024. He also spent six years with the Falcons from 2012-17. Szarka expects to see an improved defensive product for the Falcons with eight returning starters this fall. Three of those returners are at linebacker, including Isaac Hubert, Blake Fletcher and Dallas Daley.

"We're hungry to put it all together," the quarterback said. "... Last year, we knew we were a better team than our record showed. (Our goal) this year is having a record that shows how good we really are. We're all eager, and we're all excited to show that we're capable of doing so much more."

**Still not rivals:** Wyoming will never be the biggest game on Air Force's schedule, regardless of conference realignment. The Falcons' annual battles with fellow military institutions Army and Navy for the Commander-In-Chief's Trophy will always be front-and-center in the locker room. Still, Air Force knows how important it is not to overlook the team 200 miles north in Laramie. The Falcons lead the all-time series 32-28-3, and five of the past seven matchups have been decided by 10 points or less. Pokes fans probably remember last year's matchup, which was a three-point loss following a pair of fourth-quarter interceptions, including one at the goal line.

"(When Wyoming plays Air Force), it's hard-nosed football," Szarka said. "Last year when we were playing them, it was a battle every single play. It was a battle between the offensive and defensive linemen, and it was a battle from the linebackers and safeties coming down trying to fill those gaps. When you go into the week and you know you're playing Wyoming, you know you're going to be going to war against them."

## UNLV



[10-4 OVERALL,  
6-2 MW]

**Back on top:** The Rebels made just four bowl games in school history before 2023. They've now appeared in one over each of the past three seasons. Coach Dan Mullen was hired out of the broadcasting booth and led UNLV to 10 wins in his first season last fall. The Rebels lost to Boise State in the conference championship game for the third consecutive season, but they won't have to worry about that this time around with the Broncos now in the Pac-12. While UNLV returns just seven starters, one of those – Jai'Den Thomas – is making an argument as one of the greatest players in school history. Thomas was second in the country at 7.0 yards per carry last fall. The first-team All-MW selection is fifth in school history in career rushing touchdowns (31) and eighth in career rushing yards (2,457).

"He was getting phone calls (this offseason) like, 'We'll pay you a lot of money to leave UNLV and come to our schools,'" Mullen said at MW media days. "He believes in the program. He believes he can accomplish everything he wants to do, and he wants to leave a legacy here at UNLV. That's not common in today's college football era, and it speaks a lot about him."

**Another QB:** UNLV's quarterback room has been a revolving door in recent years, which speaks to the program's ability to recruit talent. Jayden Maiava, who started for the Rebels in 2023, enters his second year as Southern California's starter. Last year's starter for UNLV, Anthony Colandrea, transferred to Nebraska after winning MW offensive player of the year. The Rebels will have another first-year starter this fall, with the favorite being Auburn transfer Jackson Arnold. He'll compete with former Michigan quarterback Alex Orji in fall camp. Arnold started eight games at Auburn last fall, throwing for 1,309 yards and six touchdowns. He added 311 yards and a team-high eight scores on the ground.

"I know (Arnold) is a good football player," Mullen said. "... When he walked in the door, instead of me saying, 'Here's our playbook, you have to do what we do,' I sat down with him and said, 'What do you do well? There's some things that I want us to do, but I want to know things that you do well and that you're comfortable with. Let's build around your strengths.' For a veteran guy that's played a lot of football, there's a lot of confidence that can come in that."

**A game to forget:** It'd be hard to forget last year's fiasco between UW and UNLV. What comes to mind first, the hailstorm that covered the field at War Memorial Stadium in a blanket of ice, or the Cowboys allowing two blocked punts returned for touchdowns in the same game?

"We emphasize special teams here," defensive back Mumu Bin-Wahad said. "Special teams is one-third of the game, and that's one-third of the game that we need to win. ... Coach Mullen was really proud of us after that game, and we were also proud of each other for being able to go in there, lock arms and come out with a W in inclement weather. ... (Laramie's) a hard place to play, and it's known to be a hard place to play."



# FOES



## TEXAS-EL PASO



[2-10 OVERALL,  
1-7 CUSA]

**Old rivals:** It's been 21 years since the University of Texas at El Paso left the Western Athletic Conference to join Conference USA. The Miners are entering their first year back in the same conference as former WAC opponents Air Force, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, San Jose State, UNLV and Wyoming. The Cowboys have a 26-6-1 all-time record against UTEP, with the last meeting coming in 1995.

"Now that we're transitioning to the Mountain West, people are like, 'Oh my God, I remember the times we were playing Wyoming, and now they're coming back to the Sun Bowl,'" UTEP running back Kam Thomas said at MW media days. "The town is ready to see that matchup again."

Third-year head coach Scotty Walden also understands the history between UTEP and some of the other teams in the new MW.

"It feels like home," Walden said. "It feels like we're back home where we belong with our regional footprint. On top of that, we want our program to be able to compete at the (Group of Six) level in the national scope, compete for championships and compete for bowl games. You can't do that if you're not in a conference that fosters that. ... That's the standard of this league, and we're blessed to be part of it."

**Looking to build:** The Miners made a bowl game during their first season in the CUSA in 2005. They've made just three appearances since, with all three resulting in losses in the New Mexico Bowl. UTEP hasn't won a bowl game since it was independent in 1967. The Miners have had 15 different coaches since that 1967 Sun Bowl win over Ole Miss. Walden is the latest, as he's going into his third season with a 5-19 record. The Miners won one conference game last fall and return just five starters, including zero on offense.

**Key piece:** UTEP's offense will be led by quarterback EJ Colson, who transferred in from FCS Incarnate Word. Colson started 10 games last fall, throwing for 2,142 yards and 16 touchdowns with four interceptions. He added 287 yards and three scores on the ground while completing 70.9% of his passes. Thomas will accompany him at "Miner back," which he describes as a scat back/slot receiver hybrid. The Miners will look to improve on a minus-12 turnover margin, which tied for 127th nationally last fall.

"We're going to be the fastest show in the Mountain West," Walden said. "We're going to play fast football, we're going to play clean football, and we're going to play physical football. We want to be a line-of-scrimmage football team, no matter what. Rain, sleet, shine, day game, night game, whatever. We take a personal responsibility for our players to play extremely hard and physical when they put on that pickaxe in that orange and blue."

## NEW MEXICO



[9-4 OVERALL,  
6-2 MW]

**High expectations:** It's been a decade since New Mexico played in back-to-back bowl games, which is a goal well within reach this season. The program is coming off a 9-4 campaign in Jason Eck's first year as head coach, which was its highest win total since 2016. The Lobos return the most starters in the conference with 13, including eight on offense, and five on defense. The hype in Albuquerque is real for football season.

"I run into people all over town who are telling me, 'I'm getting season tickets for the first time ever or for the first time in 20 years,' and there's definitely a buzz," Eck said at MW media days. "Usually there's a lot of looking forward to basketball season around Albuquerque, but certainly you can like both. A lot of people are looking forward to this fall. ... We were telling recruits when we first got there, 'Hey, the football games are just like the basketball games in The Pit. ... We probably were stretching the truth at that time, but as I walked off the field that day (after beating San Diego State last season to get to 9-4), I said, 'You know what, this was just like The Pit.' We weren't lying. We spoke it into existence. We created that atmosphere."

**Return to Laramie:** Remember when the Cowboys lost to FCS Idaho at home in 2024? Jaxton Eck remembers. The senior linebacker – who was named the MW preseason defensive player of the year this summer – played for the Vandals in 2024 before transferring to New Mexico. The Ecks return to War Memorial Stadium on Nov. 21.

"That was a big win for our program at that time to get an FBS win," Jaxton said. "A lot of good memories in that game. I remember it was a sell-out game. ... It was cool to play in that environment, and it was fun seeing (Jason Eck) dancing in the locker room. We're excited about this year and getting another chance to go down there."

**Stacking days:** The Lobos had a balanced offensive attack last fall, ranking 76th nationally in rushing (152.1 yards per game) and 90th in passing (204.8). That approach will continue this season with the return of quarterback Jack Layne, who also started his career at Idaho before transferring to New Mexico. The senior threw for 2,486 yards and 13 touchdowns with 10 interceptions a year ago.

"His understanding of the game is very good," Jason Eck said. "He just has to learn that we have a great team around him, and he doesn't need to force things. I think early in the year, he put a little pressure on himself that he had to force some big plays, and he really grew in the second half of the year when we were on our six-game winning streak of just taking what was there, protecting the football and playing good ball."

## CONNECTICUT



[9-4 OVERALL]

**Back the drawing board:** Consecutive nine-win seasons cost the Huskies their head coach. With Jim Mora off to Colorado State, UConn hired longtime Toledo coach Jason Candle as his replacement. Candle brings with him an 81-44 record through 10 seasons with the Rockets. He'll have his hands full with only one returning starter and 60 incoming transfers. Mora's success with the Huskies was unprecedented, as they haven't had consecutive winning seasons since they were a member of the Big East in 2010. UConn has a 28-35 record since going independent in football in 2020. Candle could keep Mora's momentum going, as he left Toledo as the program's winningest football coach while claiming two Mid-American Conference titles.

"When you have different positions or different job opportunities that pop up, it's not often you get an opportunity to be at one that had a winning season (the year prior) and that has the foundation to grow," Candle said at his introductory news conference. "You always ask yourself, 'Can you make an impact? Can you enhance it, and can you make it better?' If the starting point is further down the line, it makes for an easier transition."

**Next man up:** Candle's biggest signing this offseason was former Tennessee quarterback Jake Merklinger. The sophomore was 13-of-24 for 173 yards and two touchdowns in a backup role last fall. Merklinger had a four-star rating out of high school, but he'll be pushed by Kalieb Osborne and Tucker McDonald in fall camp. Osborne made the move with Candle from Toledo, while McDonald is going into his third season with the Huskies. Several other players followed Candle from the Rockets, including linebacker K'Von Sherman, who was Toledo's leading tackler with 94. Running back Kenji Christian also made the move to Storrs after rushing for 528 yards and four touchdowns a year ago.

"You're talking about 40-plus transfers, you're talking 20 guys that came with us from Toledo, plus some high school guys, and then if you fast forward to 2027 class, we're over 20 commitments in that class. So, you're pushing close to 90-100 guys that we've gotten to commit to come play here at the University of Connecticut with most of the staff being new," Candle said in July. "It is what it is. I know one thing: Our first opponent's not going to feel sorry for anything we've got going on."

**Pack the bags:** How about a nice Thanksgiving weekend trip to Laramie to cap the regular season? The Cowboys and Huskies have only met once before – a 24-22 road win for UW in 2021. UConn had a chance to send the game to overtime after scoring with four seconds remaining, but a failed two-point conversion sealed the win for the Cowboys, who improved to 4-0 before losing their next four games. UW makes the return trip to Connecticut in 2029.



# MEET THE OTHER MW TEAM

## NEVADA



(3-9 OVERALL,  
2-6 MW)

**Josh Allen spoilers:** Wyoming hosted the Wolf Pack while celebrating Josh Allen's jersey retirement at War Memorial Stadium last November. While fans were thrilled to see the former NFL MVP back in Laramie, the scoreboard wasn't as thrilling. Nevada beat the Cowboys 13-7 for its third win of the season. Defensive end Dylan Labarbera and offensive lineman Jack Foster remember that day well.

"We had a chip on our shoulder," Labarbera said at MW media days. "Nobody believed in us. Packed place, and a lot of fans to play in front of. We were excited. Cool atmosphere and cool stadium, and we were just ready to go. We brought it."

**Added Foster:** "We were all fired up about it. We all thought it was going to be pretty cool with them retiring Josh's number, and we were definitely trying to spoil that. That was definitely a big thing for us."

**Offensive woes:** The Wolf Pack scored just 17.6 points per game last fall, which ranked 126th in the country. Nevada retained just one offensive coach this offseason following the hire of Brett Bartolone as offensive coordinator. Bartolone spent time on Deion Sanders' staffs at both Jackson State and Colorado. He coached Heisman winner Travis Hunter at both schools.

"I would describe (Bartolone's new offense) as air raid-esque," third-year coach Jeff Choate said. "We're not going to lean completely into that, but that's a big part of the foundation. Brett played for (Mike Leach). ... It's a very quarterback and wide receiver friendly offense, but to win championships, you still have to be able to run the ball (in Mackay Stadium) in November. What sold me on Brett in the interview process was when he said, 'We may spread it out horizontally and we may throw the ball more vertically, but don't get it twisted, we're still going to be a physical presence in the run game.' I was like, 'You're speaking my language now.'"

**Right the ship:** Choate has struggled to find his footing at Nevada, compiling just six wins through his first two years. After going winless in league play in 2024, the Wolf Pack went 2-6 against MW opponents last fall, including the win over UW. Nevada went to four consecutive bowl games from 2018-21, but hasn't been back to the postseason since. The Wolf Pack return seven starters, including four on offense, two on defense and their kicker.

"Year one, our motto was, 'Launch,' and we were thinking, 'Gosh, we've got some talent, we're going to make this happen,' and we were really, really close to having a breakthrough, and it just didn't happen," Choate said. "Now you pull back and it's like, 'We've got some things internally that we've got to fix for us to be a championship-caliber organization.'"

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